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THE Christian C E N T U R Y

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THE INDISPENSABLE SARAH COAKLEY

The Christian century

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From the publisher

Peter W. Marty

Consumed by the news

Ever since I started using my smartphone as a morning alarm clock, my wake-up habits have shifted. Instead of engaging in prayer to open my day—once a regular feature of my rising—or paying attention to the chipmunk that chirps outside my window, or conversing softly with my wife, I check the news. When I lean over the edge of the bed to shut off the alarm, I notice my screen displaying news alerts that arrived overnight. Of course I click on them, wondering what I might have heroically saved in the world had I stayed up all night.

While this reflex to tune into the news immediately is not as frightening to me as living in a household where Fox News or CNN saturates viewer eyeballs 24/7, it still troubles me. Like a billion other people, I'm consumed by the news. By the way, do we actually consume the news, or does the news consume us? Either way, it's hardly a noble activity.

Alain de Botton, a British-based philosopher and author of *The News: A User's Manual*, believes that in contemporary culture news has largely replaced religion as “our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority.” The news—not scripture, tradition, or inspired ritual— informs how we handle suffering and make moral choices. A desire to know what’s going on all hours of the day and night actually makes us more shallow than we may want to admit.

I have long thought that keeping up with the

news is part of what it takes to be an engaged and enlightened citizen. But is this really true? An avalanche of news lends pessimism and cynicism to our perspective. (I will die of cancer by age 60 because I've eaten the wrong brand of canned tomatoes.) How often does hearing the news prompt us to take action on big issues? Waves of tragic stories are more likely to paralyze than motivate, especially when we remember there is always more news waiting for us. The preponderance of negative stories—“If it bleeds, it leads”—can easily lead us to prize the sensations of vicarious experience and forget local goodness and beauty.

Our obsession with wanting to know what's going on at any given moment in the world may be a status symbol of sorts. We can plot who is up or down in the news and how people are faring elsewhere, all of which gives us the inspiration to speak articulately about world affairs and the geopolitical realm. But is that status really virtuous wisdom, or is it mostly a means of comparing ourselves with those who do not keep up as well as we do?

De Botton offers sound reasons why we ought to ponder our obsession with the news. Is there a strange desire in us to experience catastrophe vicariously? Is it possible that we yearn for something big to happen, but not so big that it will overwhelm us?

Our brains tell us: “You cannot afford to miss any news, lest you fall behind.” My faith tells me: “You can afford to miss all kinds of news, Peter, especially if you want your life back.”

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November 23, 2016 Vol. 133, No. 24

IN THIS Issue

6 Letters

Testing Abraham

7 Sexual assault—it's on us

The Editors: It's an issue faith communities can confront

8 CenturyMarks

A theology of cremation, etc.

10 Encounters with a saint

Dean Nelson: How Mother Teresa changed three people's lives

12 Love that can't be shamed

L. Gail Irwin: Surprised by grace at a freelance wedding

24 Theology through prayer

Sarah Morice Brubaker: The indispensable Sarah Coakley

28 The Methodists after unity

G. Jeffrey MacDonald: Will the UMC split or restructure?

32 Faith and family in Nigeria

David A. Hoekema: Two novels on tradition and ambition

33 From Nigeria to America and back

Amy Frykholm: An interview with novelist Chigozie Obioma

NEWS

14 Displaced Iraqi Christians await return to Mosul;
Faith-based groups, others put pressure on UN for its role
in Haiti cholera deaths;
Archaeologists discover ancient Jewish artifacts, part of
Jerusalem walls

IN REVIEW

36 Books

Edward J. Blum: *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*,
by Stefan M. Wheelock
Greg Carey: *The Beatitudes*, by George Hunsinger; *Jesus and the Prodigal Son*, by Brian J. Pierce
John McEntyre: *Varieties of Gifts*, by Cynthia G. Lindner
Jeffrey W. Barbeau: *Selected Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, edited by Timothy F. Jackson

43 Media

Kathryn Reklis: The visions of Nat Turner

47 Art

Lil Copan: *Fore Shadowing*, by Kaori Homma

COLUMNS

3 From the publisher

Peter W. Marty: Consumed by the news

22, 23 Living by the Word

Katie Hines-Shah

35 Faith Matters

Carol Zaleski: Identity as a calling

45 Notes from the Global Church

Philip Jenkins: God among the gangs

POETRY

13 Brian Doyle: The best poem ever

26 Shari Wagner: The farm wife shares her view on windows
in the new sanctuary

31 Charles Hughes: Candlepower

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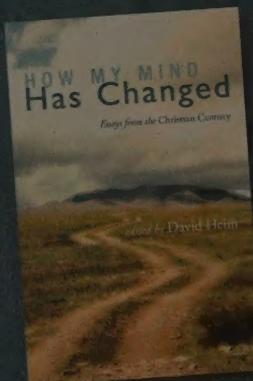
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HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED

Essays from the *Christian Century*



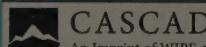
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LETTERS

Testing Abraham

In her thoughtful article, "Abraham's radical trust" (Oct. 26), Ellen Davis writes that the reason God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was "because God needs to know . . . whether Abraham is completely devoted to God."

I protest. I am convinced that Jesus' Abba saved Isaac. But sacrificing a child to prove one's loyalty was Abraham's idea, not God's. After all, if God wanted to test Abraham, a better test would have been, "Throw yourself off that mountain." And even in such a case, I would try to see scripture through the eyes of Jesus, who taught us to pray, "Do not put us to the test."

Don Chaifield
Claremont, Calif.

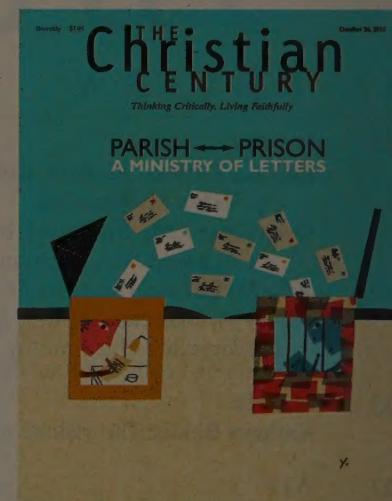
Luther's thoughts . . .

Surely the editors were neither "thinking critically" nor "living faithfully" when they let slip through without qualification this sentence in Andrew L. Wilson's article, "What endures in Wittenberg" (Oct. 26): "While Wittenberg has crumbled and been rebuilt, Luther's thoughts remain as fresh today as when he wrote them." Undoubtedly some of his thoughts do, but others do not. Luther's thoughts on Jews in the later part of his life (such as in "On the Jews and Their Lies") are examples of the latter. They are fresh only for modern-day anti-Semites.

A. W. Martin
Waverly, Ohio

Letters to prisoners . . .

Regarding Chris Hoke's article, "A church for every prisoner" (Oct. 26), I cannot begin to say how much a letter, a visit, a Christmas or birthday card means to a man or woman who is in



prison. Such is love taking care of our brothers and sisters.

Jack Kennevan
[christiancentury.org comment](http://christiancentury.org/comment)

Sex and privilege . . .

I've pondered Katherine Wills Pershey's article, "Fully naked, fully known" (Sept. 28), with a deep sense of sorrow for the author.

I keep returning to the privileged position of evangelical males. She tells the story about a youth pastor who had boys spit in a glass of water and then challenged someone to drink it—a story designed to foster disgust at sexual activity before marriage. But the image of spitting in a glass of water is clearly aimed at girls. As for the boys—boys will be boys, right?

That the author can write so clearly about her pain is a testament to her courage. Blessings to the author for that, and blessings to the evangelicals who'll read her essay and come to challenge this dysfunctional system.

Tom Eggebeen
[christiancentury.org comment](http://christiancentury.org/comment)

November 23, 2016

Sexual assault— it's on us

Sexual assault doesn't just happen to those who sit on airplanes next to—or who enter beauty contests sponsored by, or who marry, or who work for—powerful men who have a sense of sexual entitlement and a belief in their impunity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that one in five women and one in 71 men in the United States will be raped at some point in their lives, and the incidence of other forms of sexual violence is even higher. Particularly vulnerable are children, LGBT people, Native Americans, incarcerated people, and students on college campuses (where more than 90 percent of sexual assaults go unreported).

As stories about sexual assault erupted in the last weeks of the presidential election campaign, along with debates about what constitutes power and who really says what in locker rooms, a space opened up for communities of faith to address the realities of sexual assault. This conversation is necessary because silence in the face of pervasive sin is a form of complicity.

It's also necessary because survivors—and perpetrators—of sexual assault are members of our congregations. They're our pastors. They're the children we've baptized and confirmed. They're our lay leaders and choir members. They're us.

Religious institutions and faith communities have not always had the best track record in naming, condemning, and effectively countering sexual assault. In 2014, when President Obama launched the It's On Us initiative, which aims to make college campuses places where sexual assault is unacceptable and bystanders are encouraged to intervene, many Christian colleges eagerly joined the program. At the same time, some of these same colleges found themselves responding to allegations that their policies for dealing with campus sexual assaults were inadequate.

What if the standard response to such allegations were to engage in the Christian practice of public confession: naming sexual assault as a sin, enumerating how often it happens in one's own community, condemning it and the culture that supports it, and redoubling efforts to eliminate it?

Some congregations are working to create spaces for people to talk about their experiences of sexual assault and the misogyny that undergirds it. Pastors are increasingly speaking about its prevalence and impact, as well as finding ways to provide spiritual support, alongside the medical and legal systems that survivors turn to for healing and justice. Even with those efforts, many who have experienced sexual assault do not feel safe discussing it publicly. Talking about an assault can be an occasion for relived trauma. Many people choose never to disclose their experience, and that choice is legitimate.

Still, there's power in speaking about sin and in revealing what is hidden. The politicians, commentators, and survivors who have spoken out in recent weeks have opened up a subject that begs for a much deeper, franker engagement. As Obama's initiative reminds us, this work is up to each of us.

**There's power in speaking about sin and
in revealing what is hidden.**

CENTURY marks

PEOPLES' PALACE: Having turned down the sumptuous papal apartment at the Vatican and having decided to travel in a Ford Focus, Pope Francis is now giving up the historic residence where pontiffs have spent their holidays for nearly 400 years. Without ever having stayed there, the pope ordered that the palace and gardens at Castel Gandolfo, about 15 miles from Rome, be turned into a museum. The site officially opened to the public last month, giving people a look inside the palace where a succession of popes lived and died (RNS).

LATE-TERM ABORTION: Declaring his opposition to abortion, Donald

Trump talked of babies being ripped from their mothers' wombs late in pregnancy. His words prompted Amy Butler, senior minister of Riverside Church in New York, to tell of her decision to have a late-term abortion. Late in the pregnancy she was informed that her baby was suffering severe complications and would die at birth if not before. If the baby lived at all, she would have excruciating pain. Carrying the baby to full term would also have been dangerous for Butler (*USA Today*, October 28).

THEOLOGY OF CREMATION: In response to the increasing popularity of cremation, the Catholic Church

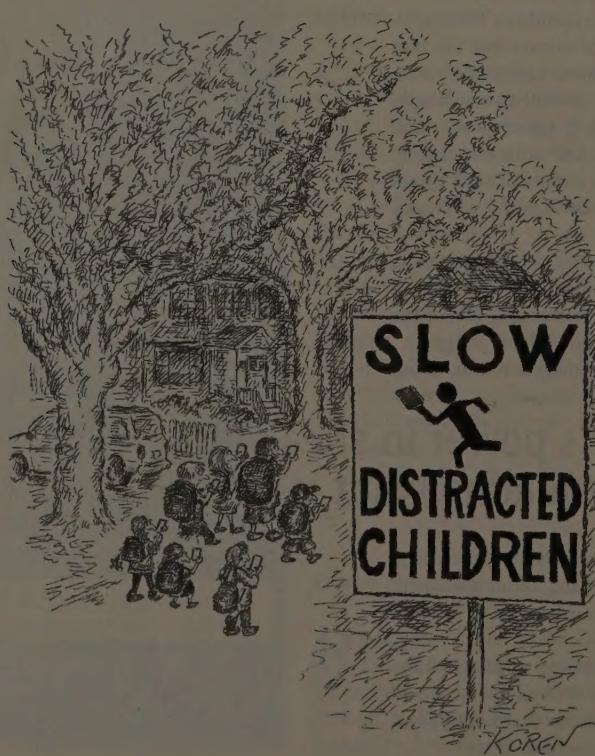
recently issued guidelines for the practice. The ashes should be buried in the ground, preferably in a cemetery, in continuity with the traditional practice of burying the body. Ashes shouldn't be stored in urns in homes or transformed into jewelry. The church said the act of cremation needs to affirm the resurrection of the body, rather than symbolize the annihilation of the body, the release of the soul from the body, the fusion of the body with Mother Nature, or the ongoing cycle of regeneration. The Catholic Church long banned cremation but began to allow it in 1963 if it didn't conflict with Catholic doctrine (*New York Times*, October 25).

WOES OF WORKING-CLASS WHITES

WHITES: For some writers, the label "white working class" suggests downward mobility and is associated with intergenerational poverty, welfare, debt, addiction, incarceration, and cynicism about the political system. These workers were once the base of the Democratic Party. Now they're more likely to think Sarah Palin or Donald Trump speaks to their situation (*New Yorker*, October 31).

MYTHS OF WORKING-CLASS WHITES

WHITES: Sarah Smarsh, a native Kansan, thinks the media get white working-class people all wrong. Media makers, she says, "cast the white working class as a monolith and imply an old, treacherous story convenient to capitalism: that the poor are dangerous idiots." More Kansans caucused for Bernie Sanders than Donald Trump, but that isn't evident in the news coverage. The media's image of white working-class people is a reflection of the elite culture in America that



assumes its own moral superiority (*Guardian*, October 13).

CHRISTIANS AND POLITICS IN RIO:

Known to the world for its skin-baring beach culture and exuberant Carnival parades, Rio de Janeiro overwhelmingly chose an evangelical bishop as its mayor late last month. Marcelo Crivella easily beat his opponent, socialist Marcelo Freixo. The conservative Crivella's triumph is the latest display of widespread anger at Brazil's established left-wing parties amid the country's worst recession in decades and the aftermath of an impeachment trial that ousted the Workers Party from the presidency after 13 years in power. It's also a sign of the rising influence of evangelical and Pentecostal churches (AP).

SIMPLY ADDICTED:

Smartphone owners check their phones as many as 150 times a day, according to one study. The behavior is considered the sign of an addiction by some, the consequence of human weakness by others. Tristan Harris, called the "Ralph Nader of technology," blames software developers who use behavioral science to program apps that are irresistible. He's on a campaign to get software developers to pledge not to exploit users' psychological vulnerabilities (*Atlantic*, November).

TAXES ON NONPROFITS? Princeton University has agreed to pay \$18 million to Princeton residents who sued the university, claiming that the country's fifth wealthiest university should pay property taxes. Connecticut lawmakers are considering a plan to levy property tax against Yale University. The governor of Maine has proposed letting local municipalities extract property taxes from nonprofit organizations. These maneuvers could lead to the undermining of a long-accepted idea that nonprofit organizations, including churches, add social value to local municipalities and should be exempt from property taxes (Bloomberg, October 14).

GRAPHIC BIBLE: Kingstone, a Christian publisher, has released a 2,000-page graphic novel version of the Old and

“Child poverty is an open sore on the American body politic. It is a moral failing for our nation that one-fifth of our children live in poverty, by one common measure.”

— Columnist Nicholas Kristof, lamenting the fact that poverty hasn't become a campaign issue (*New York Times*, October 30)

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. For some, indeed, for a great many, a feeling of heightened sensitivity can be evoked at Mass; for others, the spark can be a Beethoven symphony; for others still, an Andrew Miller slider. As James Joyce wrote in *Ulysses*, ‘Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods.’”

— John Sexton, who teaches a course at New York University on baseball and wrote the book *Baseball as a Road to God* (RNS)

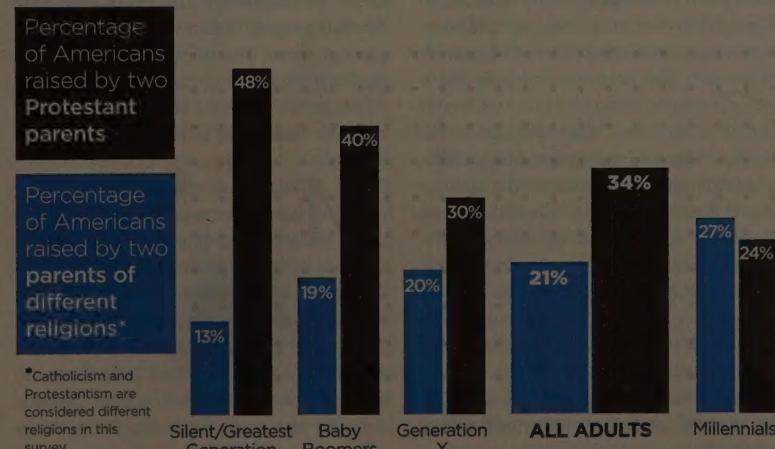
New Testaments. It took 45 illustrators seven years to produce what the publisher claims is the world's longest graphic novel and the most complete adaptation of the Bible in this genre. A leading horror artist who had worked for top comics publisher Marvel was hired to illustrate the book of Revelation. Preteens and young adults are the target audience (*Christian Science Monitor*, October 26).

WHAT GOD SAID: Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines, claims to

have heard a word from God telling him he should stop swearing. Duterte was flying home from Japan at the time, and he claims that God warned him the plane would crash if he didn't reform his speech. Duterte has used profanity in referring to Pope Francis and President Obama. More than 2,000 people have been murdered in extrajudicial killings in the Philippines since he took office July 1 and launched a war on drugs. Duterte believes that God made him president (Reuters).

INTERFAITH FAMILIES

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER



How Mother Teresa changed three people's lives

Encounters with a saint

by Dean Nelson

IN SEPTEMBER 100,000 people crowded into St. Peter's Square to hear the bells of the cathedral ring out in celebration of the newly sainted Mother Teresa. Many had arrived the night before and had waited behind barricades until the square opened at 7:30 a.m. Three hours and 15 minutes later, Pope Francis officially declared Mother Teresa a saint.

I sat in the front row of the audience with Gary Morsch, founder and chairman of Heart to Heart International, a medical relief NGO; David Bronczek, president of FedEx; and Helen Barr, a handbag and footwear designer from Manhattan. All three felt that their lives had been changed by their encounters with Mother Teresa.

As for me, I felt the irony of being present at her canonization. I have long questioned the very idea of sainthood, but now I was with thousands of true believers. I was the only one in my row who had never met Mother Teresa.

Morsch remembers the first time he visited her in Kolkata. He was a new doctor and had come to the Sisters of Charity site from Kansas City in order to do good. He chatted briefly with Mother Teresa and asked where he could best be put to use. She wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it in half, and handed it to him. "Take this to Sister Priscilla," she told him in her raspy voice.

Morsch took the note to the nearby House for the Dying Destitute and thought to himself that it was just the kind of place a doctor should be. He thought, "Soon, I will change the sign on this building, and it will be called the House of Hope for the Living." He was going to make a difference.

He handed the note to Sister Priscilla, who glanced at the contents and smiled slightly. "Follow me," she said. They walked

through the men's ward, a large, open room with rows of cots cradling what Morsch said were people who were skeletons with skin. Some were tossing in pain, too weak to fight their afflictions or even to eat. "This is where I should work," Morsch thought. "I can relieve some of this suffering."

But Sister Priscilla continued walking, and they entered the women's ward, a room filled with emaciated women who stared at them. "OK—this is where I can be useful," Morsch thought. Then they walked into the kitchen, where a modest lunch of rice was being prepared over an

in sweat and stench. He walked back through the kitchen, the women's ward, and the men's ward to tell Sister Priscilla good-bye. That's when he saw the sign over the doorway, in Mother Teresa's handwriting: "You can do no great things—only small things with great love."

"My heart melted," Morsch said. "It dawned on me that serving others is not about how much I know. It's about attitude and availability to do whatever is needed—with love. I learned that shoveling garbage with love is different from just shoveling garbage."

Mother Teresa could be cranky and impatient, but she never stopped identifying with the poor.

open fire. "Now I get it," Morsch thought. "They want to give me lunch first!"

They walked out of the building and into the back alley. Sister Priscilla pointed at a large pile of garbage that was so revolting Morsch gagged. "We need you to take this garbage down the street to the dump," she said, handing him two buckets and a shovel. "The dump is several blocks down on the right. You can't miss it." Then she was gone.

Morsch was stunned. Didn't they realize he was a doctor? He dug into the pile and carried the buckets of refuse to the dump. There he was amazed by the number of people who were swarming the area looking for something to eat or something of value. He also wondered how signals had gotten crossed such that he had ended up on garbage duty. By the end of the day the garbage pile was gone, and Morsch was drenched

As Heart to Heart International developed into a major medical relief agency, Morsch teamed up with FedEx to bring Mother Teresa a plane load of medical supplies. FedEx employees volunteered to work in orphanages and threw a party for the community of those suffering with leprosy. In 1996 David Bronczek's FedEx division provided the aircraft, along with volunteers and materials. FedEx Europe continues to send planes, volunteers, and supplies to Sisters of Charity sites in Kolkata.

When Bronczek met Mother Teresa, he said he saw the world in a different light. "My appreciation for everything negative got better," he said. "My heart got bigger. Everything was put in perspective." When he was in Kolkata, the volunteers went to morning mass with the Sisters, then separated to work at different sites. Every morning after mass the



IN ST. PETER'S SQUARE: A crowd of 100,000 was on hand for the canonization of Mother Teresa at the Vatican on September 4.

Sisters would open the doors to the center and find abandoned babies in the doorway. "Every morning," said Bronczek. "It was profoundly shocking."

Bronczek, now CEO of FedEx, tries to extend the work of empathy that he learned in Kolkata to his senior management staff in Memphis. He takes them to visit St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, where they meet with medical staff and children with serious physical issues. He wants his staff to see the "real tragedies in the world, so those of us who can help, must help."

Helen Barr's company, Barr + Barr, is on Madison Avenue in New York City. After the company held a Christmas party at an exclusive restaurant in Manhattan, she had second thoughts about the money that was spent. "We were pouring our employees into taxis at the end of the holiday dinner, and I wondered, 'What am I doing?' There must be a more meaningful way to celebrate the holiday season with our staff."

She called the Missionaries of Charity in the South Bronx and asked if they needed anything during the holidays. They told her they could use help with a Christmas lunch for elderly shut-ins in their neighborhood. "I agreed to help, but I quickly found out that when they said they needed help, what they meant was that they were putting me in charge of it," Barr said.

Barr put her employees to work to create a luncheon celebration for nearly 300 elderly people. They found a restaurant offering a special price for the food, encouraged clients to provide "swag bags" for Christmas presents, wrapped gifts, arranged transportation, and learned to sing carols. "At first many of the staff grumbled about it," Barr said. "We had people of many faiths in our company who didn't want to be working on a Christmas party for a Catholic organization. They were annoyed that the restaurant celebration was replaced by a trip to the South Bronx."

But when they got to the hall and saw how the Sisters interacted with the elderly neighbors, the employees started to interact as well. They saw poverty and the ravages of old age among the poor firsthand. "You could see their spirits lift the more they talked and served these older, disabled people," Barr said. "They were swept up into the spirit and charity of the Sisters. When the luncheon was over and the hall was cleaned up, many hours later, I could hardly recognize some of my staff. Everything about them had changed. It changed the vibe of the company."

More than 20 years later, Barr still works with the Missionaries of Charity. "Mother Teresa and her sisters daily turn impossible work into Christ's love," she said. I asked her what Mother Teresa

Dean Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University. His most recent book is *Quantum Leap: How John Polkinghorne Found God in Science and Religion*.

would think of the expensive spectacle. "She would tell us to spend all of this money on the poor," said Barr.

Barr found herself praying to Mother Teresa one night when she was close to death and sensed that Mother Teresa heard her prayers. To the amazement of the doctors, Barr awoke the next morning fully recovered. An Italian woman sitting next to Barr at the canonization was present because her son was going to have heart surgery. She was praying to Mother Teresa that day for a miracle.

I have never prayed to a saint. At times I've wanted to, because I've been drawn to certain people by their lives and significance. But I was raised in an evangelical Protestant tradition and taught that venerating saints bordered on idolatry. Even today I am still resistant to the idea that saints intervene in believers' everyday lives or that certain people are more special than the rest of us.

On the other hand, St. Ignatius of Loyola fascinates and challenges me. St. Francis of Assisi draws me into the bigger world of all creation. And I am drawn to Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton because of their complicated personalities as well as their spirituality. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints."

That's why I'm drawn to Mother Teresa. Everyone who knew her describes her as cranky and impatient. She accepted stolen money from dictators and businessmen who were trying to salve their own guilt. When she was being cared for in a hospital in San Diego, she lectured the doctors about why they weren't also treating the poor in Tijuana. When she was strong enough to take a shower, she used only cold water because the people she cared for in Kolkata didn't

have access to hot water. She lived in solidarity with those she served and never stopped loving, advocating for, and identifying with the poor.

"The saints are models of what our lives could be," writes James Martin in *My Life with the Saints*. "In following the example of their lives, we can be formed by them." That's how Mother Teresa affected Morsch, Bronczek, and Barr. They saw how she served others and followed her lead.

Gazing at Mother Teresa's banner hanging from St. Peter's basilica on the day of the canonization, I sensed that she was looking out with love at the more than 100,000 people present. I also sensed that by being there I was inviting her to fill me with her light. I looked in the sky, which was cloudless and as blue as the trim of the robes worn by the thousands of Sisters of Charity who surrounded me. It seemed that the sun had suddenly become brighter. CC

Surprised by grace at a freelance wedding

Love that can't be shamed

by L. Gail Irwin

IT WAS a freelance wedding, something I usually try to avoid. Weddings are so time-consuming and fraught with anxiety. Why perform more of them than you absolutely have to? But one of the brides was a friend of a friend, and I couldn't say no.

It was planned for a June morning in the spacious backyard of a 100-year-old home. That home was also where we held a series of premarriage counseling sessions, in what had once been the servants' quarters but was now a tiny apartment shared by the couple,

attached to the main house where their landlady lived. I would arrive for our meetings after a long day at another job that seemed more pressing, maybe because it paid better. The apartment was an odd arrangement of four rooms accessed through a cluttered mud room and up a few stairs. I always had to wait outside the door at the top of the stairs while two small, barking dogs were corralled. Once inside, I would sit with the couple on barstools at a table covered with piles of mail and kitchen utensils.

The two women were talkative and had a lot of issues. The meetings always took too long. They were not young and optimistic about marriage. They were not planning to buy a home or raise children or even go on a honeymoon. They were both in their fifties and came to this new arrangement with lots of baggage: one was on disability, the other had so much medical debt she said she never expected to retire. In the background there were problematic adult children, a former spouse, three dead parents, a disapproving

brother, a coworker who had sent them a sinister letter, a Methodist pastor who was not allowed to officiate, a covey of people from AA, and one loving mother.

Despite the fact that this was my first wedding involving two brides, it all seemed fairly routine. There were a few anomalies. We had to change the husband/wife language in the liturgy. And once, after they read me the coworker's

the service began. Did she want to say a quick prayer? She did, and we circled up for a blessing. It wasn't easy to tune out the parrots, since they all seemed to be jabbering at once. Their large cages bordered every inch of the place, not only in the living room but in the adjoining den and kitchen, too.

"Do you think we're making them nervous?" I asked of the landlady after the prayer, nodding at the biggest,

I tried to focus on the bride, but it wasn't easy to tune out the parrots.

sinister letter, I had to take both their hands in mine and breathe deeply.

At the rehearsal the night before, I uttered my standard line to the wedding party, "If anyone shows up inebriated tomorrow, I promise I will send you home."

This caused an eruption of laughter. "We're all in recovery," someone said.

The brides worried that I would mix up their names. "I'll be the one in the dress," one of them assured me.

On the day of the wedding, a scorching, humid morning, the brides quarantined themselves so they would not see each other before the ceremony. One was in the attached apartment, the other in the main portion of the house with their landlady. Just before the service was to begin, I was led through the maze of rooms from one bride to the other: from the little kitchen through a short hallway, then through their bedroom and into a bathroom with a second door that led unexpectedly into the living room of the main house.

There, I was surprised to find a spacious, windowed room full of light and comfortable, tidy furnishings. The air was cool. In the middle of the room, the bride stood in a silky white tent dress, curly hair falling around her shoulders. She was surrounded by her attendant, the landlady, and dozens of noisy, caged parrots.

I tried to focus on the bride. She was still orchestrating the last details before

brightest parrot, which had a large enclosure all to herself.

"Oh no, they love people," she answered. "They're very social." She explained that she took in parrots that had been abandoned by their owners and fostered them until they could find new homes. It was her mission.

Something in me shifted just then. I found myself docked in the harbor of some colorful characters. My usual wedding script was not really adequate for any of this.

But it was time for the ceremony. A crowd had gathered under the tent on the lawn, trying to escape the stifling heat. Somebody sang a Norah Jones tune. I

took the marriage certificate with me to the altar and fingered it protectively. The brides entered, one after the other, escorted on the arms of a best friend and a grown son. I read the homily I had written a week before, the same day we learned about the massacre in Orlando.

"Love comes first from God," I said. "It cannot be silenced or threatened or shamed or legislated away." I read from Romans 8: "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . ." The brides listened intently. The sun was burning so fiercely on our faces that we weren't sure if we were sweating or crying or both.

As they said their vows to each other, I noticed for the first time an elaborate tattoo on the arm of one of the brides. A series of little waving banners bore the names of various virtues: courage, compassion, hope, patience. I stared at the words.

The brides beamed at each other. Rings were exchanged; candles were lit. A young woman and her grandmother sang a duet about walking on a broken road. We were all walking on that road—I knew that—but the brides had somehow gotten ahead of me. I was just trying to catch up. It came time for the kiss and then I raised my hand for the benediction. But the congregation refused to stop clapping. CC

The best poem ever

What if, says a small child to me this afternoon,
We made a poem without using any words at all?
Wouldn't that be cool? You could use long twigs,
And feathers, or spider strands, and arrange them
So that people *imagine* what words could be there.
Wouldn't that be cool? So there's a different poem
For each reader. That would be the best poem *ever*.
The poem wouldn't be on the page, right? It would
Be in the air, sort of. It would be between the twigs
And the person's eyes, or *behind* the person's eyes,
After the person saw whatever poem he or she saw.
Maybe there are a *lot* of poems that you can't write
Down. Couldn't that be? But they're still there even
If no one can write them down, right? Poems in
Books are only a little bit of all the poems there are.
Those are only the poems someone found words for.

L. Gail Irwin is interim pastor of Immanuel United Church of Christ in Kaukauna, Wisconsin.

Brian Doyle

Displaced Iraqi Christians await return to Mosul

Two years ago, when fighters from the self-described Islamic State began their assault on Karemash, a town 18 miles southeast of Mosul, Martin Banni, a Chaldean Catholic priest, grabbed communion elements, the church's official documents, and a few personal items and fled.

More than 100,000 Christians from the area had already left. The archbishop of Mosul begged Christians to flee.

"We were few in number with no weapons, and we could do nothing to face the Islamic State," Banni said. "We ran."

As Iraqi forces began an offensive to retake Mosul, pushing the IS out of neighboring towns in late October, Iraqi Christians on the Nineveh plains hoped their time in exile would soon end.

"I stay awake all night following the news," said Abu Adrian, a teacher in Alqosh, a mountainous Catholic town 31 miles north of Mosul that escaped IS control. Adrian hopes that soon it will be possible for "our people to return to their hometowns and homes after this long struggle."

Since 2014, Alqosh has hosted 600 Christian families who fled the persecution farther south.

There and elsewhere in northern Iraq, the situation for the Christians has become dire. They lack jobs and money, with entire families sharing a tent or a single room. Most fled with only identity papers and the clothes on their back.

"We did not think it would be a no-return departure," said Banni, who has been displaced in Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan since 2014. "We thought it would take a day or two."

Some of these Christians say they had all but given up hope of ever being able to return.

"There was a sense of frustration among people who wondered about the

feasibility of staying like this for two years or more," Banni said. "Besides, they wondered about the time it would take to reconstruct their cities after liberation, if all this time has passed and they still had not been liberated."

That frustration grew as Iraqi government forces liberated Fallujah and Ramadi over the past 18 months while Mosul and its surrounding towns remained under IS control.

[The United Nations is gearing up to provide humanitarian relief, anticipating that up to 1 million people may be forced from their homes as a result of the military operations in Mosul. William Spindler of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said, "There are real fears that the offensive to retake Mosul could produce a humanitarian catastrophe resulting in one of the largest man-made displacement crises in recent years." He noted that 3.3 million Iraqis—10 percent of the population—are already displaced. Lutheran World Relief and other members of the ecu-

menical group ACT Alliance are also among the organizations offering aid, including in the Debaga camp, southeast of Mosul, to which tens of thousands of people have fled.]

It is unclear when Mosul exiles would be able to return.

"I have no plans," said Samer Elias, a 42-year-old Christian Iraqi writer from Mosul who has been living in the Kurdish city of Dohuk. "The future for us Christians seems quite gloomy and obscure."

And it is uncertain what returning Christians will find. Many, like Elias, don't know if their homes remain.

[The Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, living in Irbil, wrote in a public letter on November 1 that they feared Christian lands would become disputed.

"The urgent question that people are currently asking is: To whom will we, as people and land, belong?" they wrote. "We do not want our heritage to be wiped up when the process of cleaning the land happens."]



AWAY FROM HOME: Martin Banni, a priest displaced from Mosul, has spent much of his time playing with children from Christian towns and telling them stories from the Bible. Christians in the region are watching to see if Iraqi forces will be able to push out forces of the self-described Islamic State.

Banni said some of his flock are worn down from the past two years and pessimistic about the future. Some have been considering going to Europe or elsewhere rather than returning home.

But the 25-year-old priest, who was ordained in September in Irbil instead of in his beloved Mosul, already has priorities for rebuilding hospitals and schools.

"This is most important because it ensures our people can come back to their homeland and live in peace there once again," he said. "The liberation of the region is finally happening and the prospect of going home feels closer now than ever before."

In spite of how his community has been treated, he hopes the future will be different.

"We want to face our problems and solve them, not to escape from them," he said. "A people who have borne all these difficulties can never be broken."

Emad Sabeeh Georges, 36, a sales manager now in Irbil, wants to return to his native Qaraqosh, which was recaptured by the Iraqi army, Reuters reported.

"This is my homeland, the land of my ancestors," he said. "We have not conquered or taken it by force—we are Iraq's real sons, and we have learned how to live in peace with others. I insist on going back, to stay, to rebuild, and to change the extremist thoughts around us." —*Gilgamesh Nabeel and Ammar Al Shamary, Religion News Service*

Haitian groups, and others in a call for the UN to accept moral responsibility.

"This call for justice for cholera victims in Haiti has been strong and consistent throughout the past six years," Oswald said.

The devastation of Hurricane Matthew in early October left people with even fewer resources to prevent cholera, which often spreads through contaminated water and causes dehydration that can kill people within hours if they do not receive medical attention. The hurricane ripped away cholera prevention centers as well as health-care facilities and people's latrines, said Oswald, who has been based in Port-au-Prince with her husband, Ted Oswald, for the past two years but who is currently working in the United States.

As nongovernmental organizations and state authorities respond to the thousands of new infections since the hurricane, some groups are continuing to put pressure on the UN to take responsibility for introducing cholera to Haiti.

"There was waste that was improperly disposed of that leaked into a tributary that spread into the Artibonite River, which is Haiti's main water source," Oswald said. "It just hit like wildfire."

Scientists traced the bacteria in the river to a base of UN peacekeepers from Nepal.

"The particular strand of cholera that was found to contaminate the river is the same strand that is endemic in Nepal," Oswald said. "It was not obvious at all that these troops had cholera, but they were carrying it."

The UN did not screen its peacekeepers before sending them to Haiti, which is something that groups advocating for victims have been pushing for as a standard practice, as well as more caution with sanitation, all around the globe.

Philip Alston, an independent expert on extreme poverty and human rights, wrote a report on the UN's response to cholera in Haiti, which was not present previously. On October 25 he told the UN General Assembly that "while the UN has for the past six years ignored claims by victims for a remedy, focusing exclusively on measures to contain the outbreak," the UN's recent efforts show

improvement in eradicating the disease and helping those afflicted by it.

"The bad news is that the UN has still not admitted factual or legal responsibility and has not offered a legal settlement as required by international law," Alston told the UN, according to the UN News Service.

The Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, based in Boston, and its Haitian partner, Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (Bureau of International Lawyers), filed 5,000 claims with the UN in November 2011, seeking a national water and sanitation system, compensation for victims, and a public apology.

More than 840,000 people have been infected, and more than 10,000 have died, the IJDH reports, drawing on studies suggesting the official counts have been underestimated.

After the UN said it would not receive the claims, IJDH, BAI, and other attorneys filed a suit against the UN in New York federal court.

In August, the Second Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the UN's claim to immunity. The attorneys have not yet decided whether they will appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Around the time of the appeals court ruling, a draft of Alston's report was leaked to the press. A representative for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a statement: "The United Nations has a moral responsibility to the victims of the cholera epidemic and for supporting Haiti in overcoming the epidemic and building sound water, sanitation and health systems."

The statement made in August "felt like a great milestone," Oswald said. But questions remain about how far the UN will go in its response.

Brian Concannon, executive director of IJDH, said that the organization's advocacy efforts for victims were not merely "about winning a court case. There were lots of important parts of it."

The UN has talked about providing material assistance to Haitians affected by cholera, though the amount Concannon has heard mentioned—\$200 million, which the UN describes as a "support package to reach those immediately affected"—would not constitute justice for the victims in his view.

Faith-based groups, others put pressure on UN for its role in Haiti cholera deaths

Every family in Joseph Dade Guiwil's community has been harmed by the cholera epidemic in Haiti, the worst outbreak in recent history.

"I say to the UN: give us justice," Guiwil told Katharine Oswald of Mennonite Central Committee, a Christian relief and development organization.

United Nations peacekeepers have been found to be the source of the cholera outbreak that began six years ago and has killed thousands. MCC has joined other faith-based organizations,

"There were real losses to the people," Concannon said. Cholera affected people who "were so poor that they couldn't afford a little bit of money for treated water."

A lot of families went into debt because of lost income, funeral expenses, and other costs.

The compensation could come through a mix of cash payments to families and through contributions to community projects and rebuilding.

"Kids who lost their parents, they need money," he said, while others might be satisfied with the building of a school in their community, for example. "It's important to consult with them and to make sure that the victims feel that justice has been done."

IJDH and MCC were two of the organizations that have collaborated in the Face Justice campaign for the past year. Other faith-based groups, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Church World Service, joined the effort to bring attention to the stories of victims and survivors.

The network also included lawyers, scientists, and doctors, Concannon said. Each was doing separate work, but it benefited the other efforts.

"This collaborative, network-based strategy," he said, "is exciting and a template for how you can do broad social change."

Oswald noted that some NGOs working in Haiti "are reticent to use the language of obligation related to the UN." Yet among the groups who have worked together on advocacy for eradicating cholera, "every group can say that none of this would have been possible without the other."

Part of what MCC contributed was the work of people on the ground in Haiti for the past six years. As part of the Face Justice campaign, the Oswalds interviewed survivors and family members of victims in the countryside and around Port-au-Prince. Some families lost their main breadwinners. Older parents lost their adult children and are left with no one to care for them.

Olivia Jean-Pierre described how her two teenage daughters became sick with cholera in 2011. She has sought reparations for cholera victims alongside other families since then.

"My girls haven't yet become 100 per-

cent again," Jean-Pierre said. "They go to school and put their heads on their desks, saying their heads hurt. They used to be such excellent students."

Silana Dozeis, a single mother of four, lost her home in the hurricane, she told Ted Oswald.

"So many people here have been sick with cholera, many have died," she said, and now she fears for her children. "When I saw the water I had to give them to drink after the storm, I cried." —Celeste Kennel-Shank, the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*

Archaeologists discover ancient Jewish artifacts, part of Jerusalem walls

Israeli archaeologists have made two recent discoveries expanding knowledge of Jewish history as far back as the time of the First Temple in the seventh century BC.

In one find, Israeli archaeologists unveiled the earliest known reference to Jerusalem in the Hebrew language that doesn't come from the Bible. On a small piece of papyrus, part of a wine-shipping order, is written in ancient Hebrew: "From the king's maid-servant, from Na'arat, jars of wine, to Jerusalem."

Plundered from a cave in the Judean Desert (in what is today the West Bank) by antiquities robbers, the papyrus was recovered by the Israel Antiquities Authority's robbery prevention unit, dated, and analyzed.

The papyrus, or scroll, like the Dead Sea Scrolls found nearby decades ago, was preserved thanks to the Judean Desert's extremely dry climate.

Eitan Klein, deputy director of the robbery prevention unit, said that any one of three kings mentioned in the Hebrew Bible for that time period could have been the wine's intended recipient.

"The document represents extremely rare evidence of the existence of an organized administration in the kingdom of Judah," Klein said. "It underscores the centrality of Jerusalem as the economic capital of the kingdom in the second half of the seventh century BC."

Questions arose about the papyrus's origins at a Jerusalem archaeology conference soon after the papyrus was unveiled.

"How do we know it isn't a forgery intended for the antiquities market?" asked Aren Maeir, an archaeologist at Bar-Ilan University, who was not involved in the acquisition or analysis. "After all, there are well-known cases in which writing was forged on an ancient platform. It's very possible that only the papyrus itself is ancient."



UNCOVERING ANTIQUITIES: Workers slowly expose artifacts at an excavation site in Jerusalem. Sling stones on the ground are evidence of the battle that was waged at the site 2,000 years ago, one of two recent discoveries believed to be from biblical times.



DEFENDING JERUSALEM: A spearhead from the battle against the Romans in AD 70.

In archaeology much more weight is given to an object's authenticity if it is dug up from an undisturbed excavation than if it is found elsewhere.

Amir Ganor, director of IAA's robbery prevention unit, said he and his colleagues—including renowned biblical scholar Shmuel Ahituv—"tried in every possible way to check the papyrus."

Carbon-14 dating proved that the papyrus is from the First Temple period, and an epigraphic examination found that the lettering is consistent with seventh-century BC writing.

"We used the methods used to check the Dead Sea Scrolls," Ganor said. "If someone has an additional method, he's invited to apply it. We, as a country, were obligated to get our hands on this, and I'm certain it's authentic."

The second recent archaeological find was the location where the Roman army breached the outer walls of ancient Jerusalem before capturing the city and destroying the Second Temple nearly 2,000 years ago, the Israel Antiquities Authority said.

An exploratory survey last winter at a future construction site uncovered the spot. After expanding the excavation archaeologists discovered the remains of a tower jutting from what they believe was the Third Wall, the outermost wall surrounding Jerusalem at the end of the Second Temple period.

Opposite the tower's western facade they found dozens of catapults and stones the archaeologists are certain were used by the Romans, led by Titus, against the Jewish guards who defended the wall from the tower.

Rina Avner, one of the lead archaeologists, said that the discoveries confirm a detailed account of the battle by the contemporary historian Josephus.

"It was amazing," Avner said. "We found pottery from the Second Temple

period within the cement of the wall, which was on the same level as the balustrades. We dated the embedded pottery to AD 70, the year Josephus said the Romans attacked the city and destroyed the Second Temple, forcing the Jews into exile."

Archaeologists and other Israelis pointed to the discoveries as additional proof that Jews lived in Jerusalem thousands of years ago. The find comes amid an outcry after the United Nations' world heritage organization, UNESCO, ratified two resolutions referring to the Temple Mount solely by its Muslim name, Haram al-Sharif or Noble Sanctuary. The resolutions made no mention of Jewish and Christian religious or historical ties to the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest in Islam.

That action "erases history and actually tries to destroy our past and the Christians' past," Avner said. —Michele Chabin, Religion News Service



PHOTO BY SHAYNA HANNAH, COURTESY OF THE ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY

ANCIENT PAPYRUS: A document believed to be from the seventh century BC is preserved in the Israel Antiquities Authority's Dead Sea Scrolls laboratories.

Researchers open tomb believed to be the one where Jesus was buried

Future pilgrims to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre will be able to glimpse what is, according to tradition, the tomb of Jesus.

It's all thanks to a team from the National Technical University of Athens, which is undertaking critical repair work on the site. The team started excavating the tomb in late October in an effort to uncover the original limestone slab on which Jesus was supposedly laid.

According to *National Geographic*, the project is a \$4 million effort to restore the Edicule, the building that sits atop the grave believed to have held the body of Jesus.

"It will be a long scientific analysis, but we will finally be able to see the original rock surface on which, according to tradition, the body of Christ was laid," said Fredrik Hiebert, archaeologist-in-residence at the National Geographic Society, a partner in the restoration project.

The history of the Edicule goes all the way back to Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. After conversion, he reportedly dispatched his mother, Helena, to Jerusalem, where locals pointed out a cave believed to be the site where Jesus lay for three days after his crucifixion. According to Christian tradition, he was resurrected after that time and later ascended.

Helena reported the location to Constantine, who constructed the original Edicule (from the Latin, meaning "little house") over the cave to mark the spot for future generations. That building has long since been destroyed, and over the years the cave was covered with layers of marble.

On any given day, pilgrims line up, hoping for the opportunity to crouch by these marble slabs in the most recent Edicule, constructed between 1810 and 1812.

The three religious groups that control the site have long agreed that the building needed critical repairs, but it has taken more than half a century to line up funding and determine the best course of action. Badly damaged by humidity and

candle smoke over the years, the church is currently supported by huge iron girders installed by the British in 1947.

The current plan is to shore up the foundations of the building by injecting mortar around them. But radar tests have revealed that the original cave walls—believed by many to be long gone—are still standing. That means the restoration team has to excavate the original tomb of Jesus in order to ensure that no mortar gets into the limestone.

Researchers say it's an unprecedented opportunity to study one of the most sacred sites in Christianity.

"The techniques we're using to document this unique moment will enable the world to study our findings as if they themselves were in the tomb of Christ," chief scientific supervisor Antonia Moropoulou told *National Geographic*. A program in November on the *National Geographic* channel reveals the process to viewers.

Future visitors will get a view of the tomb that hasn't been available since Constantine's day: the team cut a hole in one wall of the Edicule, making it possible to see all the way down to the cave. —Ellen Powell, *The Christian Science Monitor*

Exhibit at Smithsonian captures art of the Qur'an

Islam prohibits the depiction of God or prophets, and some Muslims believe drawing any animate being is also forbidden. Certainly no such images appear in the Qur'an, its central holy book.

So there are no pictures in the first major exhibit of Qur'ans in the United States, *The Art of the Qur'an*, at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery on the National Mall until February 20. But the more than 60 Qur'ans on display present a visually stunning tour of more than 1,000 years of Islamic history, told through the calligraphy and ornamentation that grace the sacred folios.

"We can convey a sense of how artists from North Africa to Afghanistan found different ways to honor the same text," said Julian Raby, Sackler director. "They found different forms of illumination and binding to beautify the manuscripts



PHOTO COURTESY OF SMITHSONIAN

SCRIPTURE AS ART: A single-volume Qur'an copied in the 16th century is from the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul and is now on display at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

they had copied. But above all they developed different forms of script to express, in a dazzling array of calligraphic variety, the very same text. The results could be intimate; or they could be imposing. But in every case the scribe invested his calligraphy with piety."

Intricate calligraphy and rich ornamentation made these Qur'ans—which come almost exclusively from the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul—cherished possessions of some of the most powerful people of the Muslim world. Each comes with a rich story of those who commissioned it, copied it, entombed it, or preserved it.

Many were offered as gifts to forge military and political alliances.

Essentially though, Qur'ans are religious objects, the word of God that Muslims believe was transmitted through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, when Islam was founded. Details within the text and on the margins of the parchment convey the pronunciation of words and the cadence of the verses.

Intricate ornamentation—geometric illuminations in gold, azure, and other brilliant colors—beautify the pages, but also serve a function, said Simon Rettig, assistant curator of Islamic art at the Sackler.

"They help the readers locate him or herself within the Qur'anic text; they tell you when you have to prostrate yourself," he said, pointing to a complex geometric emblem in an early 14th-century manuscript by Abdallah al-Sayrafi, a master calligrapher who worked in Tabriz, a historical capital of Iran.

Al-Sayrafi was trained in six Arabic scripts and uses three—sometimes writing in gold, sometimes in black—in one of Rettig's favorite Qur'ans in the exhibit. His illuminations look like multicolored sunbursts and gilded foliage blossoms.

The exhibit, on two floors of the Sackler, also aims to explain that the Qur'an is scripture meant to be chanted and heard.

"Calligraphy is a way to capture the beauty of the orality," said Massumeh Farhad, chief curator at the Sackler and Freer galleries, which house the Smithsonian's Asian art collections and exhibits.

Scholars don't know exactly how scribes wrote Qur'ans centuries ago. Farhad said it's possible they would inscribe verses as they were recited, each showing reverence through his skill and style.

"That's why the work of Yaqut is considered so supreme," Farhad added, referring to the 13th-century master scribe who worked in Baghdad for the last caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. "It has this sort of lightness. It seems to float on the page."

The exhibit is not intended as commentary on today's politics, organizers said. Work started on the project six years ago, before sharp rises in Islamophobic rhetoric and violence in the United States and Europe, and before Muslim immigration and culture became a flashpoint in American and European politics.

But the Smithsonian is not sorry for the timing, and it hopes the exhibit can help quell fears of Islam and its adherents.

The Art of the Qur'an may lead some to "reflect on their own assumptions," Raby said.

As the exhibit makes clear, Muslims refer to Jews and Christians as *ahl al-kitab*—people of the book. The curators show how the Qur'an, the Torah, and the Christian Bible share variations of the same stories and the same prophets' teachings. One Qur'an at the Sackler is turned to a sura, or chapter, that explains:

"Step by step, He has sent the Scripture down to you [Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier as a guide for people and He has sent down the distinction [between right and wrong]."

The Turkish multinational Koc Holding is the principal sponsor of the exhibit. —Lauren Markoe, Religion News Service

Facing discrimination, Dalit caste members are converting to Buddhism

Kanti Sarvaiya left his Hindu heritage behind and became a Buddhist.

"Hinduism has done nothing for us," said Sarvaiya, 20, who lives in the western Indian state of Gujarat. "So our family elders have decided to convert."

In July, upper-caste men publicly flogged a group of Dalits—formerly considered "untouchables"—in the village of Mota Samadhiyala on the suspicion of slaughtering a cow, a sacred animal in Indian religions. Some of the victims were Sarvaiya's relatives. Fed up with Hinduism's caste system—entrenched for centuries—he and his family want out.

Rallies across the state of Gujarat began October 11 with mass conversion ceremonies where thousands of people formally became Buddhist. Dalit groups and nonprofits organizing the series of rallies expected more than 40,000 people to have converted by the end of the year.

"More people die of caste-related violence than terrorism," said Ashok Samrat, 35, a prominent Dalit leader in Gujarat who himself converted at a public event in 2009 and is helping organize the events. "Buddhism has shown the possibility of dignity and equality."

There have been several incidents of violence this year. Among those, in Mumbai, a Dalit teenager was killed for romancing an upper-caste girl, and in Tamil Nadu, a Dalit man was murdered for marrying an upper-caste woman.

Lower-caste conversion to other religions—most often Buddhism—isn't new, but it is receiving a renewed impetus in the wake of the violence.

The caste system divides people into groups; at the bottom are the Dalit. Historically, they have been denied education, consigned to menial tasks such as scavenging, and deprived of self-determination.

The Indian constitution safeguards what it calls "scheduled castes" through affirmative action policies. In theory, all citizens are equal, but in practice violence is on the rise.

In 1956, Dalit leader and national



PHOTO COURTESY OF REUTERS / AMIT DAVE

MASS CONVERSIONS: People shout slogans as they attend a protest rally against what they say are attacks on India's low-caste Dalit community in Ahmedabad, India, on July 31. Organizers of rallies at which Dalits are converting to Buddhism expect 40,000 to do so by the end of the year in response to discrimination.

icon Babasaheb Ambedkar, who also framed India's constitution, led a mass conversion to Buddhism in Maharashtra after unsuccessfully fighting for change within Hinduism.

Referred to as the neo-Buddhist movement, such mass conversions have taken place regularly ever since.

"We found a connection with Buddhism," said Laxman Mane, an activist and poet from Maharashtra, who converted in 2006 and then galvanized 500,000 others to do the same in a public ceremony in Mumbai in 2007. "It is a way to organize."

C. Lakshmanan, associate professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies in Chennai, agreed, saying that Dalits are refusing to submit to age-old indignities.

"In India, conversion is a mode of protest and expressing dissatisfaction," Lakshmanan said. "It is both political and religious."

Prime Minister Modi condemned the caste atrocities during a recent television interview.

"All those who have fed this country with the poison of caste divide have destroyed the country," he said. "Are these incidents fitting of a civilized society?"

However, there is a sense among activists and community members that

despite his public condemnation, caste violence has intensified since his party, the right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP, came to power in 2014.

Crimes against scheduled castes, including Dalits, increased 19 percent from 2013 to 2014, according to national crime data statistics.

"There was oppression during the previous government's rule too, but it is worse now," said Shyam Sonar, a Mumbai-based activist.

In India, Hindus constitute about 80 percent of the population, Muslims 13 percent, and Buddhists less than 1 percent, according to 2011 census data, the latest available.

The Buddhist population growth rate was 6 percent, compared with the national population growth rate of 18 percent.

The Indian constitution allows freedom of religion and the possibility of voluntary conversion. Still, Samrat said, after conversions, the district authorities in Gujarat have failed to issue conversion certificates.

If those certificates are not given, thousands will march to the state capital, Gandhinagar.

"Our demand is let us live with dignity," he said. "We have not been allowed into the mainstream." —Bhavya Dore, Religion News Service

People



■ **Barney Zeitz**, 65, an artist on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, doesn't know where in Europe his ancestors lived. But it could have been a town like Flieden, Germany, where there was a Jewish community from 1562 until 1938.

On November 9, 1938, the Flieden synagogue's windows were broken during *Kristallnacht*, when Nazis vandalized synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses throughout Germany. The Nazis also burned the Flieden congregation's Torah scrolls and other sacred objects, according to a website recording the history of synagogues in Germany. But the building survived, and a Protestant parish purchased it in the early 1950s.

A few years ago that parish, the Evangelische Pfarramt Flieden, received a visit from Marie Ariel, a Jewish woman who came to see the sanctuary where her father celebrated his bar mitzvah in 1899. The church wanted to honor the sanctuary's Jewish history through stained-glass windows made by a Jewish artist. Ariel recommended Zeitz, whose work has included church windows as well as a sculpture for a Holocaust memorial museum in Rhode Island.

Zeitz visited Flieden and met Thomas Fendert, the only person in the church who spoke English, who has since become "like a brother" to Zeitz. Fendert took Zeitz to the local Jewish cemetery, where all of the last names on the tombstones were familiar to him. He learned about some of the German people's suffering after the war and how they're responding to Syrian refugees today.

Then Zeitz spoke to a group of about 75 at the church.

"I told them about my great grandfather, and how I didn't know which country he was from," he said. He described his trip to the cemetery. "It was very emotional," for him as well as for the congregation.

Fendert visited Martha's Vineyard in September, and the Flieden church is beginning to explore a relationship with the congregation at the Martha's Vineyard Hebrew Center.

Holger Biehn, pastor of the Flieden parish, wrote through a translator that he is grateful to God for creating these connections "from our small village over the ocean."

Zeitz, while working on the stained glass for the church, is raising money to create a second set of windows for the Hebrew Center using the same frames. They now have a nonprofit sponsor so that donations are tax-deductible as they seek to raise another \$100,000 for the Flieden project and \$100,000 for the second set of windows in the Martha's Vineyard synagogue (details are available at www.facebook.com/barneyzeitzfineart).

Zeitz designed the windows with a landscape on which Numbers 6:24-26 is written in Hebrew and German.

"It's this shared prayer for peace—Aaron's prayer, the priestly prayer—that Christians and Jews have been using for thousands of years," he said. "It all ends in the word *peace*" in windows on either side of the altar.

"When you walk into this church you'll have this vision of these prayers running toward the front," he said.

Zeitz begins with panes of single-color glass. He breaks them multiple times, recalling *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass, he said. But then he fuses them together, creating beauty out of the shards.

"There's this broken, re-fused, broken, re-fused quality to it—I'd call it magical," he said.

The windows will also include the star of David. He sees displaying that Jewish symbol as a "major step" for a Protestant church.

Zeitz is aware of five or six German churches meeting in sanctuaries that were once synagogues. To his knowledge, the Flieden parish is the first to do more than mount a plaque noting that history.

"It's not about forgiveness, it's not about an apology," he said. "It's not a Holocaust memorial."

The windows instead commemorate the Jewish people who lived in the town for centuries.

"We were there," Zeitz said. "This is a very generous, sincere acknowledgment—it makes me feel like I can go over there and say, 'This is where my people are from.'" —Celeste Kennel-Shank, the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*

■ **Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows**, 50, will be the first black woman to lead a diocese in the Episcopal Church.

The Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis elected her on the second ballot during a diocesan convention held at Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis, on October 28. She has been director of networking in the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. Other black women have served as suffragan bishop, assisting the diocesan bishop, said Jim Naughton, a spokesman for the Diocese of Chicago.

She has expertise in historic preservation and a passion for issues of gun violence, social justice, and racial reconciliation, according to the diocese.

"In 19 years of ordained ministry, and especially in the past five, helping to oversee and restructure the Diocese of Chicago, I've supported communities of transformation, communicated a vision of hope, and gathered and net-



worked God's people across distance and difference," Baskerville-Burrows said in a statement released by the diocese. "I believe these experiences have prepared me to lead and serve in the particular place that is the Diocese of Indianapolis."

The current bishop, Catherine Maples Waynick, plans to retire in the spring, after a decade in the role. Baskerville-Burrows will be consecrated on April 29. —Religion News Service, Episcopal News Service

■ **Samuel Kabue** believes in giving people chances. He was born during the "very, very hard" colonial days in Kenya and saw his hopes for life after national independence changed when he became blind at age 16.

"I am what I am because people gave me a chance to prove myself," said Kabue, an ordained elder of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, who leads the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network. He recently published a memoir, *From the Village to the World*.

In the 1990s he established a program for people with disabilities through the National Council for Churches of Kenya.

"At that time, they thought that was all I could do," he said. Then "the general secretary recognized that my potential was beyond just doing disability work."

He became director of advocacy for the NCCK, including work with economic justice, peace and reconciliation, and youth.

He had faced many challenges up to that point.

"Before joining the university, I realized that I wanted to be a church minister," he said. "At that time, in my church, there was quite a hierarchy of authority that stated that if you wanted to join the theological institution, you should be recommended by your local church."

But the local body beyond his congregation, which was next in the chain to forward his name, didn't do so, without giving Kabue reasons, so he couldn't pursue studies in theology at that point. He received a bachelor's degree in education and got a government job as a teacher.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NATHAN HILL/NCCK

More than a decade later, in 1989, he received a scholarship from the World Council of Churches for people with disabilities to study in England. After that he joined the ecumenical movement.

In 2012 he finally received his theology degree, having studied for a master's at St. Paul's University, in Limuru, Kenya.

"One of the biggest problems of people with disability is that they are rarely given a chance to prove what they can be," he said. "You cannot give people a chance unless they are included and you can discover their potential." —Marcelo Schneider, World Council of Churches

■ **Rachel Azaria's** office is sparsely but intentionally decorated with a Hebrew translation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s biography and a framed photo of her role model, Hillary Clinton.

Before she became a member of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, Azaria spent her childhood shuttling between the United States and Israel. This has led her to try to quell the conflicts between American and Israeli Jews over questions of religious practice.

Azaria, 38, adapts her Orthodox Judaism to Israeli secular life. Since March 2015, she has represented the center-left Kulanu party and has been described as the only member of Israel's 66-member coalition government willing to challenge the ultra-Orthodox monopoly in determining family rights issues and issues of religion and state.

She led efforts in July to temper a bill that would have given the Chief Rabbinate, which stringently interprets Jewish law, unbridled authority over mikvahs, or ritual baths.

But with respect to the not-yet-implemented vote in January to create an egalitarian prayer space next to the Western Wall, Azaria hopes American Jews can understand that Israelis are still "figuring out" what it means to live in a Jewish state.

"I know Reform and Conservative leaders have no more patience," Azaria said after the liberal Jewish leaders

recently threatened to rescind support for Israel over the delay.

This year, crises also erupted over the Chief Rabbinate's refusal to recognize conversions that were authorized by several mainstream American Orthodox rabbis, including Gedalia Dov Schwartz, the head of the council that oversees Orthodox conversions in America.

Azaria sees the controversies as symptoms of a country that hasn't had time to embrace a joint civil vision.

"When the state was founded, its leaders let the ultra-Orthodox handle issues of religion while they dealt with wars and building the economy," Azaria said. "Determining who we are and what we stand for is this generation's task."

She described Israel's battle over religion and state as a "civil war of words."



PHOTO COURTESY OF MAAYAN JAFFE-HOFFMAN

Israeli president Reuven Rivlin has said that modern Israel is dominated by four groups: ultra-Orthodox, secular Jews, national-religious Jews, and Arab Israelis. Azaria said that for Israel's first 65 years, each of these groups thought they would ultimately grow enough to trample their competitors and set the state agenda.

"All these groups are starting to realize they are not going to take over," Azaria said. "This is the first stage."

The way she sees it, the state's Jewishness evolved naturally and is interwoven into society.

"Anything not divisive we figured out; now there are conflicts," she said.

Azaria believes in working from within the system. Despite its center-left positions, her party joined Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government coalition, and she believes she can accomplish much more than opposition lawmakers by learning to "play the game" inside the coalition.

Tehila Nachalon, a religious feminist activist who has worked alongside Azaria for 15 years, said Israel's conflict is not between the ultra-Orthodox and other Jewish people.

"It's a fight against extremism," Nachalon said.

She said having Azaria in the Knesset has greatly helped the cause of religious equality.

"There are few others like Rachel, certainly no other women," she said. —Maayan Jaffe-Hoffman, Religion News Service

LIVING The Word

December 11, Third Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER IS SO DARK. There is a reason we light candles, sing songs, and gather together this time of year. In the Northern Hemisphere we do these things not just for the sheer joy of the season but to stave off the darkness crowding the doorway and nipping at our heels.

It's worth mentioning this because everything in our culture this time of year tells us we are supposed to be happy: glossy magazines, manipulative TV specials, mass-produced Christmas cards, grocery store circulars. Inevitably we end up disappointed. The turkey is dry, the airport crowded; the shiny boxes that might have contained Lego sets and American Girl dolls hold school clothes and underpants instead. Even the church fails to deliver. The baby angels will be off pitch, the sermon inadequately uplifting, the crowd at the midnight mass a little thinner than last year.

And these are just the minor disappointments. Therapists and pastors know to save room on their calendars in December. Loss is magnified in a season of light. Empty places at the dining room table can't be ignored. Job loss and debt are revealed in the paucity of the feast or the scarcity of presents. When there is no comfort and joy, faith falters.

The story goes that John the Baptist was born on the summer solstice. Six months older than Jesus, quick enough at the Visitation to leap in his mother's womb, John is a figure of dynamism, judgment, and light. John's brightness lays sin bare; his prophecy calls down fire.

Yet as this week's Gospel passage opens, John finds himself alone in a dark prison cell. Suddenly, he who recognized Jesus as the Messiah seems to harbor doubts. "Are you the one who is to come," John asks Jesus through his disciples, "or are we to wait for another?"

In ancient prisons, prisoners were cared for by friends and family, their needs provided not by the state but by supporters. News passed freely. So John must know something of Jesus' ministry. In the preceding chapters of Matthew, Jesus has cleansed a leper, caused the lame to walk, restored sight to the blind, and raised the dead. John surely knows all these stories.

He may also know that this litany of miracles follows a pattern set by Isaiah. In today's first reading familiar themes emerge: the eyes of the blind are opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame leap like a deer. Jesus' reply to John references not just this passage from Isaiah but others as well. One wonders if John is waiting for Jesus to fulfill Isaiah 61:1, "liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." Perhaps this most personal of dashed hopes causes his doubts to rise.

Some cast aspersions on John for this supposed lapse. Some see it as evidence that John never reaches heaven, taking literally Jesus' final words in this passage ("the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he"). But it seems churlish to hold a condemned man's fears against him. Jesus' ministry, after all, is not much like John's. The complaints of John's disciples throughout Matthew's Gospel serve to highlight the fact—Jesus is not what John expected. There's more feasting, less fasting; less condemnation, more grace. At this moment it seems there is more darkness, less light.

Jesus seems especially generous with John in pointing out his blind spot. John, though the greatest among women born, is also not entirely what the people expected. He is unlike the official leaders of the Hebrew people. He is no "reed shaken" by the winds of Rome. John wears camel's hair in the place of soft royal robes. He surpasses the great men of his day and those before. This is good news—especially to the downtrodden and the poor. John is "more than a prophet." He is the one who ushers in the new age of the Messiah, even though he won't live to see its fruition.

And therein lies the crux of the story. It is always darkest before the dawn. The cross comes before the empty tomb, death before resurrection's light. For Jesus' followers this is an offense, a "scandal" in the Greek. John will not be the last to doubt or even desert. Jesus' family will question his ministry. The disciples will flee and hide. Judas will betray him; Peter will deny him. And yet this will not stop the coming of the kingdom. We can't blame them for their wavering. Like John the Baptist, these first followers of Jesus don't know the end of Jesus' story.

But we do. Our waiting is different from John's. We know how this story ends: in hope and promise and light. And those of us who suffer and sorrow this season remember that the Messiah comes to his glory through the cross.

Jesus comes to be fully one of us—to know our joy and sorrow, our goodness and sin, our life and death. Jesus will know what it is to be poor, to lose someone you love, to be friendless, to suffer. Jesus will, like John, face an imprisonment that ends in death. If we had any question before, Jesus' ministry makes it plain: there is no place we can go where the Messiah will not be present. Not even our doubts and fears. Jesus comes into these places and redeems them.

In these dark days before the solstice—before hope dawns—we are not alone. The Messiah is not in the glittering fantasy of advertising, the false promise of materialism, even the idol of a perfect family. When we seek him in those places we are bound to be disappointed. Jesus meets us instead in our Christmas disappointments and doubts, our loneliness and our longing. Those who wait in darkness will see a great light.

Reflections on the lectionary

December 18, Fourth Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1:18-25

THERE ARE MULTIPLE Greek words for *birth* that Matthew could use to begin his Gospel and describe the birth of Jesus. The one he uses is *genesis*. The genealogy that prefaces Matthew's birth story seems as orderly as the first six days of creation. The names are what we expect, all the greatest heroes of Jewish history.

Scratching the surface exposes more complicated truth. Abraham sets aside his oldest son, while Jacob cheats his brother out of his birthright. David murders a man to prevent a scandal. The women Matthew includes aren't much better. Tamar plays prostitute; Rahab actually is one. Ruth is a foreigner. Yet all have their place in the new creation of Jesus.

As Joseph enters the story, we are primed to hear of Jesus' genesis in a new kind of way. By the time a direct descendant of Abraham finds his betrothed pregnant with a child not his own, the messiness of family life has been well established.

Mary is "found with child," and I can't help but wonder who found her. Mary's situation must have been known by some, perhaps by all: her parents, the village busybodies, maybe even the local rabbi. Joseph has to do something, but what?

He has no good options. Divorcing Mary quietly might be the just thing to do, but it isn't good. She might not be stoned to death, as Levitical law contends, but without a man to keep her she might well be reduced to begging or forced into prostitution. If instead Joseph marries a seemingly unfaithful woman, he himself is tainted by her sin. And that's not the worst of it. Joseph runs the risk of nurturing an interloper in his own dynasty. In patriarchal terms, Mary's son stands to inherit the birthright of Joseph's own biological child. Joseph is still considering when an angel appears.

The first words out of an angel's mouth are almost always "Do not be afraid." It may be that seeing an angel is frightening, but it seems just as likely that angels encounter people in situations where they are already afraid. Joseph in Matthew's Gospel and Mary in Luke's are no exception. On the cusp of marriage, they find themselves with a pregnancy they didn't seek or expect. The very existence of this child may well threaten their place in their community, their synagogue, and their families. Their own relationship may be broken before it has even begun. In the face of this new beginning, fear seems reasonable.

Yet maybe things aren't as new as they seem. Matthew's genealogy underscores that the more things change, the more they stay the same. God has always worked through messy and

broken families, restoring them and bringing hope. Isaac will not be sacrificed; Judah will have sons. Rahab will save the people; Ruth will be claimed a matriarch by a people not her own. God will choose the unlikely one, the second son, the barren woman, the one who seemed beyond redeeming. Shame and heartache are not foreign to God. There is truly nothing new under the sun.

For proof, note that God will help Joseph, son of Jacob, in the same way God helped another Joseph, another son of Jacob, farther back on the family tree. As then, a dream will illuminate an escape from shame and death. God will provide a path to salvation consistent with that which has come before.

More than any other Gospel, Matthew views the Jesus story as the continuation of the Old Testament. Beyond the figures of the Pentateuch and the histories, Jesus fulfills the prophets' vision. Eight times Matthew writes that Jesus "fulfills" what was spoken by the prophets; the first occurs in this week's reading. Matthew's explanation of the virgin birth, Joseph's dream, the angel's visit, and a new name are rooted firmly in the past. The virgin birth and the naming of Jesus are not original; they are the completion of what was once begun.

God created the world in the beginning; now God creates it anew in Jesus. God who made the universe out of nothing decides to do something even harder: enter into a human family.

God has always worked through messy and broken families.

ily. Despite its messiness and failure, its sin and sorrow, its brokenness and despair, God will redeem Abraham's line. God will fulfill the promise made to Abraham and his descendants, that through them God will bless all the families of the earth.

And we are part of this genesis, this new creation. Through the waters of baptism, Jesus becomes our brother and we children of God. Consequently, just as God enters the story of Abraham's family, God enters our own. Our genealogies—with their complexity, their secrets, and their shames—are now part of Jesus' story too. Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, Tamar and Rahab, Mary and Joseph—none of them is beyond God's capacity to love and save. Neither are we.

Christmas will be our confirmation. In these remaining days of Advent we look with hope and expectation for genesis. The child born into Mary and Joseph's family is born into our family as well. God will make the world new through him—and, because of him, through us.

The author is Katie Hines-Shah, senior pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Hinsdale, Illinois.

THE INDISPENSABLE SARAH COAKLEY

Theology through prayer

by Sarah Morice Brubaker

LET US IMAGINE a truly dreadful possibility. What if there had been no Sarah Coakley, theologian? (I should stipulate that in this alternate history Sarah Coakley is not written out of existence but merely finds some other fulfilling form of labor.) To be sure, this seems unlikely. According to interviews, Coakley knew she wanted to be a theologian by age 12. But let us imagine that through some catastrophic mishap Coakley's prodigious theological talents had been effectively squashed early on.

Sarah Morice Brubaker writes for Religion Dispatches and is a contributor to Placing Nature on the Borders of Religion, Philosophy and Ethics (Ashgate).

In this dire reality, there would have been no *Powers and Submissions*, no *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*; no *God, Sexuality, and the Self*. We would have none of the edited volumes that Coakley has shaped, nor the graduate students whose work she has helped to guide. The 2012 Gifford Lectures would have been given by somebody else. How might theology be different?

Academic theology might well have produced someone formally similar to Coakley, but I dare say that person would be less interesting. To be sure, Coakley's work stands at such appealing intersections that its appeal can tend to seem inevitable. Of course the spiritual senses can provide a way out of contemporary theological cul-de-sacs. Of course it is worthwhile for theologians to consider transformative desire, particularly if we want to say something thoughtful about bodies instead of scolding or ignoring them. Of course theology will need to avail itself of the best of other disciplines and should result in a vision for life rather than just a set of claims. Judging from the regard in which Coakley's work is held, these are the kinds of moves that many people want contemporary theology to make. They are certainly more invigorating than either cranky nostalgia or fatuous individualism, to mention two of the more shopworn theological options.

Yet we ought not to mistake appeal for predictability. These were not obvious areas to work in until Coakley did so. If they seem obvious to us, it is only because Coakley argues for them so persuasively. Had there been no Sarah Coakley, theologian,

If prayer does nothing, then Coakley's theology does not hold together.

someone else might have been prompted by similar theological longings, but it is hard to imagine that the work itself would have been so creative or so beautifully rendered. Now that Coakley has published the first of her projected four-volume systematics—*God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*—her considerable influence will surely grow, much to the benefit of anyone with a stake in theology.

For Coakley, contemplative Christian practice goes hand in glove with feminist theological method. According to Linn Marie Tonstad, who interviewed Coakley for a chapter in *Key Theological Thinkers*, Coakley's "characteristic preoccupations" emerged when she was a Georgia Harkness Fellow at Harvard Divinity School in the early 1970s. Already immersed in both scriptural studies and philosophical theology, Coakley began participating in daily Eucharist and practicing contemplative prayer. In the process Coakley internalized the notion that theology is done by bodies—rather than, say, incorporeal minds that somehow manage to get words onto paper. This attention to bodies provided a point of contact with feminist thought, the need for which was apparently made clear enough at Oxford. In a profile by Matthew Reisz for *Times Higher Education*,

Coakley recalls that she spent two "very painful" years at Oxford in the early 1990s, where she encountered maddening assumptions that "I couldn't really do the job but had been appointed to look nice."

Attention to bodies continues to drive Coakley's deep engagement with feminist thought. But her feminism is not unfiltered liberal feminism. For Coakley the desideratum of theology is not autonomy or self-mastery, even for those to whom it has been unjustly denied. Rather, theology's desire, and humanity's desire, is for God. And desiring God means practicing unmastery, relinquishing control, and emptying oneself—all theological themes that, Coakley acknowledges, can make other feminist scholars nervous.

In a world where women continue to struggle simply to have their claims about their own lives taken seriously, lauding "unmastery" seems to hand misogynists an easy out. *Now now, ladies!* one can hear them saying. *Don't you know that God is more pleased by unmastery and self-denial than by asserting yourself? Why even this lady theologian says so! Now hush.* (And indeed, one sometimes wonders whether a few of Coakley's more conservative admirers believe as much, perhaps more than they realize.) But if such a critic would not accept Coakley's terms, neither would she accept theirs. For Coakley will not concede that it is a bad wager to yield to God through prayer, even in the midst of suffering. To freely submit to God is to make oneself available for transformation by the One who refuses to be controlled or contained by any social structure, including patriarchy.

It would be easy to make this claim badly. One could, for example, ignore the fact that "free submission" is a tall order. If I do not really know myself, and if my desires are shaped by forces I cannot detect and never agreed to, then how shall I ever know that I have submitted freely to God? In the turbulent dark waters of my psyche there are certainly many chunks of patriarchal flotsam. Maybe I get a self-gratifying thrill out of being submissive, in ways I fail to understand and therefore mislabel as "pious." For that matter, how can I even be sure that the God to whom I submit myself is the one who will transform my desires and has the potential to transform the world? How do I know I am not submitting myself to an idol?

Coakley handles this objection easily enough: of course I am submitting to an idol, at least at first. Being transformed by prayer takes time, and it involves a lot of waiting. (That, incidentally, is one of the reasons Coakley will not accept a disjunction between systematic theology and spiritual practice. The kind of systematic theology she is undertaking—*theologie totale*, in her parlance—needs to avail itself of more than claims. It requires prayer. This is perhaps the most astounding aspect of Coakley's theology. If prayer does nothing, then Coakley's theology does not hold. I am not sure which is more remarkable: the fact that this is true of Coakley's theology, or the fact that it is not true of more systematic theologies.) During that time of waiting, the Spirit is changing me, drawing me toward the first person of the Trinity by transforming my desires. Those transformed desires, in turn, enable my ongoing consent to this ongoing submission. As the Spirit reveals to me

the God for whom I long, I freely yield myself more and more completely.

In *Powers and Submissions, The New Asceticism, and God, Sexuality, and the Self*, as well as in many articles and essays, Coakley meditates on the gendered aspects of such transformation. Unlike theologians who want to fix the gender dynamic—by contrasting “feminine” creation with a “masculine” Godhead, for example, or “feminine” receptivity with “masculine” activity—Coakley shows that divine desire proves the gender binary to be labile and slippery. In prayer, in liturgy, and in the ascetic life, masculine signifiers transform into feminine ones and vice versa. The very gender binary winds up being interrupted time and again by the Spirit, who—as triune Person—is the consummate interrupter of binaries. Gregory of Nyssa is Coakley’s constant companion here, joined by such diverse figures as Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Clement of Alexandria.

If the remaining three volumes of Coakley’s systematics consisted of nothing more than variations on these themes, they will be worth reading. However, Coakley has lately given us teasers that her next volumes will contain sustained consideration of race and class in addition to gender. Judging from the précis she provided in a recent talk, these arguments promise to be quite exciting indeed. That talk, delivered in March 2016 as part of Princeton’s Annie Kinkead Warfield lecture series, is titled “Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation.” In it Coakley stipulates that any disentanglement of race and gender is an artificial one, for in reality “they intersect all the way across and down.” Yet their histories and

deployments have not been the same, and as such, each warrants its own discussion.

In much the same way that she reconstructs the category of “submission” in order to subvert its dreadfully gendered history, Coakley plans to reconstruct that racialized category “darkness.” Darkness, like submission, has been used to reinforce systems of oppression—not least in the epistemologies coming out of the Enlightenment, the very name of which lets us know how its chief thinkers regarded darkness. But darkness has other theological meanings which align beautifully with Coakley’s overall approach. Theological darkness can name, and has named, a kind of noetic yielding to God: a dispossession of one’s own longing for intellectual stability, so that one can be more fully conformed to Christ.

This is not to suggest that there is any sort of essential correlation between “dark” ways of knowing and people whose bodies have been coded as “dark” by modern hierarchies of race. Such a claim would leave the construct of whiteness altogether intact, whereas Coakley intends to subvert it. It is to say, though, that such contemplative darkness can, according to Coakley, subvert the modern category of race in life-giving ways. So, too, can the spiritual disciplines who sustain such darkness.

Coakley does not come up with these ideas having spoken to no people of color whatsoever. She does not simply muse about how race seems to work, having considered its conceptual machinery and read many books on the subject. Instead, Coakley bases her theology on what she calls “field work.” Coakley’s work has always shown deep regard for the spiritual lives of people who are not professional theologians with impressive CVs. But in her recent work, this theme comes through even more strongly.

The forthcoming volumes of Coakley’s systematics promise a treatment of race drawn from her pastoral work with prisoners, many of them men of color (as well it should, given the degree to which our racist society manages dark persons by putting them in prison). Surely a theology meaning to challenge Enlightenment forms of knowledge cannot proceed by standing at a safe distance and musing about the lives of people one has not met. To the extent that Coakley, a white woman, allows her theology to be transformed—by the Spirit through prayer, and by incarcerated men of color through her relationships with them—she goes further than many white theologians. If I may say so, this white theologian appreciates the reminder and the example.

That, oddly enough, brings us to another aspect of Coakley’s thought: her theological conversation with the sciences. If my reading is correct, Coakley’s thoughts on evolution, far from being a departure from her other work, share the same basic commitments as the aspects of her theology already discussed.

Recently Coakley has sought out dialogue with evolutionary theory, offering theological riffs on such notions as sacrifice, altruism, selfishness, and so forth. Like many of Coakley’s other theological moves, this one invites controversy. Coakley acknowledges as much in the first of her Gifford Lectures,

The farm wife shares her view on windows in the new sanctuary

Some members are voting for clear glass while others believe frosted would be nicer. I prefer a view of Ed Troyer’s cows and a way to survey the sky. It gives me pause to think of everyone in the same room with no way to look out and no sunlight crossing the pews. Call the outside a distraction, but I’d rather pray with the Amish in a barn, the big door flung open and swallows with forked tails, darting in and out. I’m saying this softly because even Mennonites who favor clear glass might see some taint of worldliness, unsettling as the stained glass in the old sanctuary when it was Methodist. Sam Troyer, Ed’s father, loaded those windows on a wagon headed for the dump, but he took a wrong turn. No one in LaGrange County has a prettier barn than Ed’s—you should see the milking parlor, how lilies of the field hold the light.

Shari Wagner

which she opens with a consideration of Adam Gifford himself. "It is often said," Coakley remarks, "that Gifford intended natural theology to be altogether abstracted from the complications of Christian revelation and grace," a sort of "flat plane" where science, philosophy, and theology can meet in an "uncontentious quest for truth." To say that this notion is outdated is an understatement; virtually no theologian wants to be seen as holding this position anymore. Indeed, theology's allergy to science has become a problem in its own right, according to

For Coakley, theology is always done by bodies.

Coakley, with an entire generation of theologians having been trained without any real understanding of science. This limits the scope and imagination of those people who still care enough about theology to try and do it, while leaving everyone else to conclude that science entails atheism.

For Coakley, this condition simply will not do. For lack of a shared understanding of human flourishing, we human beings are tearing each other apart, often literally. Therefore, the theologian "is morally compelled to adopt such an apologetic task." That apologetic task involves engaging in dialogue with evolutionary theory—itself in a state of upheaval, on Coakley's account—while maintaining a discipline of prayer. One engages in this conversation not because one hopes to hear a biologist say something that sounds vaguely Christian, and thus secure for theology some legitimacy it was believed to lack. Rather, one engages in this apologetic task because to do so is to open oneself up to the Spirit. "I strategically dispossess myself to the Spirit's blowing where it will into all truth; just as, in prayer each day, I try to practice that same dispossession to the Spirit's calling of me more deeply in the life of Christ, bracing myself for the bumps and lurches and surprises I have been led precisely by scripture to expect."

Understandably, this approach raises the hackles of some who are concerned about theology's prophetic capacity. A particularly lucid statement of this worry is found in Amy Laura Hall and Kara Slade's article in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, "The Single Individual in Ordinary Time: Theological Engagements with Sociobiology." The authors are understandably concerned that such a strategy could "mistake our work for God's work," thereby leading to an

"over-emphasis on human responsibility for collaborating in ventures presuming to mark evolutionary progress." Presumably this worry will either be confirmed or addressed in the remaining volumes of Coakley's systematics. On my reading, though, Coakley's dialogue with scientists is not to be understood first and foremost as a position in a theological debate. Rather, her dialogue with evolutionary biologists is akin to her dialogue with incarcerated men of color. Both involve talking to those from whom one has been told to seek protection.

And here again, Coakley's work returns to the indispensability of contemplative prayer. Does theology need to be protected? Do Christians need to be very careful whom they talk to? On the one hand, certainly. In a world marked by sin, my desire for God can so easily be misdirected, and there are plenty of people and corporations eager to help me misdirect it in the way that benefits them most. One must proceed with care.

On the other hand, it is Coakley's audacious claim that what "protects" theology is not its skill at hunkering down. It is prayer. By dispossessing oneself through prayer, the theologian may trust that no lasting harm will come from listening to other people. To the contrary, the Spirit is ready to transform me into someone who can listen to anyone, parse their words, love them, and learn about God and humanity from them—albeit in ways that neither they nor I would ever expect.

CC



Will the UMC split or restructure?

The Methodists after unity

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald

WITH ENTRENCHED camps miles apart on the issue of homosexuality, the United Methodist Church is careening toward a fateful choice: either split into two segments along ideological lines or radically redefine how it operates as a church. A moderate middle still hopes that the parties can somehow hang together under one denominational banner. Much will hinge on whether an overhauled concept of church—perhaps featuring more autonomy for regional bodies, congregations, and clergy—can win broad support in the global 12.1-million-member denomination.

"This is a very fragile moment for us—in some ways a very sacred and holy moment—because we're dealing with big stuff," said North Dakota bishop Bruce Ough, who serves as president of the UMC's Council of Bishops. "We're trying to do it in a way that probably has not been done by others who have wrestled with this [issue]."

Fueling the urgency is the election in July of Karen Oliveto as the UMC's first openly gay bishop. For conservatives, this election presents a crisis, because the church's Book of Discipline prohibits any "self-avowed, practicing homosexual" from becoming an ordained minister. They argue that covenants among Methodists will be rendered meaningless if the church lets Oliveto become a bishop and de facto blesses in one place what it bans in another.

The election of Bishop Oliveto in the UMC's Western Jurisdiction—which stretches from Colorado to Alaska—was no isolated event. In May, ahead of last summer's quadrennial General Conference in Portland, Oregon, more than 140 Methodist clergy identified themselves as LGBT. Another 820 pledged a willingness to break church rules by performing same-sex wedding ceremonies. Several annual conferences (regional bodies) have moved to create processes for ordaining gay candidates for ministry. Such activism is not likely to end for those who see the movement as a necessary pursuit of justice.

"We're living out the gospel as people are marrying LGBT people and more [LGBT persons] are getting ordained," said Matt Berryman, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, which advocates for same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT people in the UMC. "We're not going to change, we're not going to leave, and we're going to keep doing more of the same."

Moments of reckoning loom on the horizon. At the request of the South Central Jurisdiction, a Judicial Council hearing on Bishop Oliveto's election is scheduled to be held next spring.

The Council of Bishops' executive committee had requested an expedited ruling from the Judicial Council, but that request was denied. The bishops' request revealed, however, their sense that church policy urgently needs to be clarified.

The nine-member Judicial Council includes five new members, so it is difficult to predict what its ruling will be. The panel's leanings could come into focus this fall as it takes up cases involving openly gay candidates for ordination in the Northern Illinois and New York Annual Conferences. Its ruling on Oliveto could prompt the church to act decisively on an issue that's been debated for decades at General Conferences.

"Nobody is going to be surprised if the church courts say

Most Methodists want the issue of gay ordination finally resolved one way or another.

[Bishop Oliveto] has to be removed," said Ted Campbell, a historian at Southern Methodist University who's been calling for more local and regional autonomy to allow for gay weddings and ordinations in some parts of the church. "But that's the point at which I would say there's likely to be a big explosion"—a widespread demand that the church finally resolve the issue one way or the other.

But the church isn't waiting for an ecclesiastical court to decide the matter. This fall, a 29-member Commission on the Way Forward will take up the task of crafting a proposal that can win enough churchwide support to be adopted at the next General Conference, scheduled for 2020. Some conservative activists are among those calling for a special General Conference to meet sooner—in 2018. For that scenario to play out, however, the commission would need to issue proposals by spring 2017 with the confidence that they have a realistic shot at being approved at a 2018 conference.

"If we come to a called General Conference and do not have a proposal that can pass, the church will be in utter chaos," said Rob Renfroe, a Texas pastor and president of Good News, a conservative renewal movement in the UMC. In

G. Jeffrey MacDonald writes frequently for Religion News Service.

that event, the bishops “will have lost all leadership credibility within the church.”

Options before the commission fall into three main categories: enforce the rules, restructure the church, or let opposing parties within the church go their own ways. Discerning what Methodists will find acceptable and practical may be as crucial as any theologically argument.

Option one would take the form of saying that existing bans on the ordination of gay persons and on same-sex marriage rites must be enforced across the church. A proposal of this sort could provide a structural apparatus to ensure accountability. Such an approach would satisfy conservatives, such as the ones who gathered October 7 in Chicago to form the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

But few observers think Methodists would have the stomach for an approach that would involve expelling fellow Methodists or pressuring those who don’t conform to leave.

“Our preferred option is that we maintain the position that we have voted in every four years for 44 years, and that our bishops enforce it,” Renfroe said. “But we have a new reality now, where broad areas of the church are unwilling to live by our policy.”

Option two is to restructure the church to allow for greater diversity of belief and practice on issues of homosexuality. A precedent here could be found in the UMC’s African churches, which have considerable latitude in allowing for local cultural expressions of the faith. But conservatives, including many of 4.9 million members of the UMC who live outside the United States, successfully blocked plans for so-called local options from reaching the General Conference floor for a vote last summer. Whether that resistance remains strong or softens in coming months could be key to whether the UMC holds together or breaks apart. The Wesleyan Covenant Association warned that a “plan that requires traditionalists to compromise their principles and understanding of scripture, including any form of the ‘local option’ around ordination and marriage, will not be acceptable.”

One proposal that failed to gain traction at General Conference but could resurface in the work of the commission would let clergy themselves decide whether to officiate at same-sex weddings. The idea, originally offered by megachurch pastor Adam Hamilton of Kansas, would also let annual conferences decide for themselves whether to ordain openly gay candidates. This option might keep the UMC intact.

If the commission has any bias at this point, it is to preserve the unity of the denomination, according to Ough, who chairs the Council of Bishops executive committee, which nominated the 29 members of the commission. (The commission includes eight bishops, 13 clergy, and eight laypeople.) This plan could potentially win support from progressives who see it as a step—however incomplete—toward full inclusion for LGBT people in the church.

“The job won’t be done until the humanity of LGBTQ people is recognized all around the world,” said Berryman of the Reconciling Ministries Network. “But we realize we are on a journey, and we make incremental moves toward equality.”



UNPRECEDENTED: Bishop Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian who was elected this past summer to become the first openly gay bishop of the United Methodist Church, stands with Mountain Sky Area bishop Elaine Stanovsky (left) and Los Angeles Area bishop Minerva Carcaño.

For any plan to pass, however, it’s going to need broad support from conservative evangelicals. For decades, they’ve had sufficient numbers to sustain the church’s official stance against homosexuality. Their ranks are multiplying, especially in Africa, home to 4.7 million UMC members, which is on track to become the global hub of United Methodism within a few years. Conservatives are squeamish about creating a church with a patchwork of beliefs and practices, which to them would represent a watered-down and inconsistent witness to the gospel.

“A plan that requires traditionalists to compromise their principles and their understandings of scripture, or that allows for varieties of beliefs and practices within the global communion of the church, isn’t acceptable to most evangelicals,” said Jeff Greenway, lead pastor of Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church in Ohio and a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association’s board of directors. For many conservatives, a church that’s of two minds on sexual ethics might not be one worth preserving, especially since progressives regard the local option as a stepping-stone to eventual churchwide support for same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT people.

Option three would also restructure the church to preserve unity, but it would effectively divide the church into a progressive wing and a conservative wing. Jurisdictions that currently reflect geographic regions could be reconstituted along nongeographic lines to reflect stances on homosexuality and other issues.

Rethinking the nature of the Methodist episcopate is also on the table, according to Bishop Ough, and it could be neces-



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sary in the so-called “jurisdictional option” which Chris Ritter proposed ahead of last summer’s General Conference. But Ritter has acknowledged that Oliveto’s election complicates the situation and makes an amicable realignment more difficult to achieve.

Activists on both sides say they could live with a separation agreement that enables congregations to take local assets, including real estate, with them. Such terms would aim to prevent the types of lawsuits that have plagued other mainline Protestant denominations in recent years. That strategy could spell relief from what’s been a bruising, multidecade culture war within the denomination. Activists say bishops are ready for such a move.

“When they talk to you in private, bishops tell you what they really think,” Renfroe said. “Bishops are saying there’s got to be some kind of structural separation. [One bishop said] the structure of the church coming out of this commission will be so different from what we have today that ten years ago it would have been referred to as schism.”

Neither side appears eager to walk away from the church structure.

Bishop Ough said, “If the commission would get to the place where it said, ‘the only way we can maximize our missional impact is that we go some separate ways,’ then I don’t think we at the Council of Bishops would say that we refuse to listen to that.”

A complete division of the UMC into two distinct churches would be far from easy and is not immediately on the table. Something resembling that might occur under the umbrella of the United Methodist Church name—in which case the umbrella church might amount to little more than some shared services, such as a publishing house and pension management. But a large moderate middle wants to maintain unity in some form and might accept trade-offs to get it. Neither camp wants to leave the UMC, and neither feels pressure to bow to such an outcome.

“Whoever leaves, it’s like you’re the loser,” Renfroe said. “You leave the church name, the church structure, and the church assets with the other group.”

Progressives should be free to leave and take property with them if they wish, Renfroe said, but he expects they’ll want to stay because they want to change the church.

Indeed, staying put is the progressives’ plan. They believe their movement is catching fire. So if anyone were to leave, in their view it should be evangelicals who’re disgruntled by the wave of support for LGBT issues.

“The energy to leave is not coming from progressives,” Berryman said. “The energy to leave comes from the grassroots of the conservative movement in the denomination because it’s not behaving according to the rules they like.”

But conservatives say they have no intention of jumping ship. After all, they argue, they’ve long supported the denomination’s unwavering stance forbidding same-sex marriage and the ordination of people who are self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. They have no problem abiding by the church’s covenants, they say, and therefore shouldn’t be pushed out, especially when conservatives are gaining clout in the church as global demographic trends play out. The UMC is declining fastest in the American Northwest and Northeast, where progressive attitudes hold sway. It is growing fastest in Africa—the Africa Central Conference has grown more than 300 percent over the past decade.

Amid so much uncertainty, stakeholders are positioning themselves for a future in which voluntary affiliations and partnerships might define what it means to be United Methodist. The Wesleyan Covenant Association intends not to launch a new denomination but to facilitate collaboration among like-minded, orthodox Methodists, according to Greenway.

Meanwhile, church agencies have already rebranded themselves so as to drop denominational ties in their names. The General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits has become Wespath Benefits and Investments, and the General Board of Discipleship has become Discipleship Ministries. Such rebranding could make it easier for Methodist groups to forge voluntary partnerships within a new, more autonomous framework.

United Methodists are girding for old structures to give way to ones that reflect a revamped understanding of what it means to be church. When this chapter ends, they could find themselves more federated than united. At least for now, unity remains the hope, even if the unity preserved will mean something different from what it has meant for the past half century.

CC

Candlepower

Candles come out a couple of days
After Thanksgiving Day—the four
Circled for Advent; others, too,
Thick, green, spruce-scented—and erase
The memory of darkness more
Effectively than tree lights do.
They lift their inarticulate fires
Toward heaven, the way the world desires
What prayers, at best, can half express.
One lithe flame dances, yellow-gold,
Shimmering on sure sapphire feet . . .
But it’s brief, this forgetfulness!—
Not much against the dark and cold,
Like food the hungry never eat,
Like broken peace, souls shrunk to parts.
Thus, candles burn, and Christmas starts.

Charles Hughes

Faith and family in Nigeria

by David A. Hoekema

NIGERIA IS BY FAR the largest of Africa's 54 nations, and its \$1 billion economy is fifth largest on the continent. With 51 percent adult literacy, it lags far behind other former British colonies such as Ghana and Kenya, yet it has contributed much—possibly more than any other African nation—to the growing list of novels written in Africa that are read around the world.

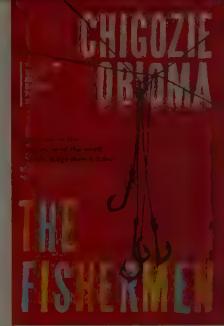
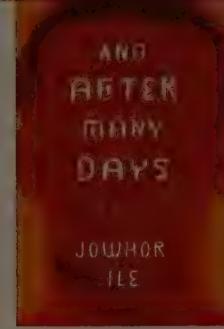
Two debut novels by Nigerians, richly textured narratives of family life in both city and village, are attracting critical attention and deserve a wide readership. In each of them, a young narrator observes his elders negotiating the economic and cultural challenges of daily life in postcolonial Africa. Each is set in the 1990s, when Nigeria made halting steps forward in its quest for effective and accountable government and then slipped catastrophically backward. Each illuminates the tensions between African traditions and Western ambitions, between the old ways that have sustained families and communities for many generations and the new ideas that promise but do not always deliver an escape from poverty and isolation.

When Jowhor Ile's narrative begins in 1995, the Uku family of Port Harcourt (once a verdant garden city on the Niger delta and now a chaotic megalopolis) is comfortably established in the Nigerian middle class. General Sani Abacha has thrown out Nigeria's elected government in favor of a military dictatorship, one of several that mar Nigeria's postindependence history.

Like millions of others across Africa, the Uku family left the village for the city to make a better life. Now the family owns a television, a radio, a freezer, and a telephone—though subject to the whim of the electricity company, the Nigeria Electric Power Authority. "NEPA had a change of mind and restored power," Ile writes. "A new energy was injected into their evening. They caught the tail end of the news, which was followed by a government-sponsored program about skills acquisition projects for rural women."

Ile tellingly conveys the optimism and skepticism of the Ukus' life. The government provides services for the poor, but electricity lasts only a few hours a day. The Uku children are in school, and the oldest has just been accepted to university. They remember to greet elders in the proper way, earning their parents the respect of those who have stayed in the village.

From the voice of a nine-year-old boy, Ajie, we learn of the family's history—and, at the very outset, of the unexplained dis-



And After Many Days: A Novel

By Jowhor Ile

Tim Duggan Books, 256 pp., \$25.00

The Fishermen: A Novel

By Chigozie Obioma

Back Bay Books, 304 pp., \$15.99 paperback

appearance of his eldest brother, Paul. Ajie is a close observer of family dynamics, adults jockeying for influence, and the gradual but dramatic disruption of ordinary life by protests against government repression and the brutal military reprisals they elicit.

Familiar routines of school and work are complicated by

These works join a crowded shelf of engaging fiction by Nigerian authors.

strikes and roadside checkpoints as Paul prepares to depart for university. Ajie's return to boarding school—organizing "the things he needed back in school, legal and contraband"—may be delayed by protesters blocking main roads. But Ajie's father maintains his faith in the advance of liberal values, and his mother, who brings the children to church several times each week, trusts God for guidance and healing. Through Ajie's eyes, Ile conveys the resilience of family life in the face of cataclysmic political changes.

Eventually, as the time frame alternates between Ajie's early childhood and 1995, readers glimpse the darkness that lies beneath the surface. Respected figures in the village flee to the Uku home for refuge after learning that criticizing government policies has put their lives in danger. Important events from Nigerian history are recounted, including the conviction and summary execution of nine critics of the Abacha government. (The most renowned among them—Ile does not men-

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tion him by name—was the internationally recognized writer Ken Saro-Wiwa.)

The nine-year-old narrator never solves the mystery of his brother's disappearance, but Ajie reappears as a young man of 19 in the novel's brief closing section when the facts at last come to light. Ile's description of the family's response, quietly eloquent, underscores the ordinariness of tragic events. "The dead will not be consoled," Ajie reflects, and "neither will those who live in the skin of the dead." Ajie will return to his studies in London; his sister will complete her medical training in the United States; and their mother, now a widow, will keep working on her compendium of native herbs.

Chigozie Obioma's novel is also the story of a family that has moved from village to city and embraced modern ideas, living with the tensions between traditional and modern ways, between Christianity and African traditions. The father and breadwinner of the Agwu family has been sent off to manage a bank branch in the far north, while his wife and six children remain in a more developed city in the south. For nine-year-old Benjamin, the fourth child, life revolves around his three older brothers. Benjamin's voice from boyhood alternates in the novel with his perspective at the age of 19, looking back and taking stock.

Like Ile, Obioma conveys the political dislocations of the period indirectly through the fortunes of the Agwu family. The narrative begins in the early 1990s when a respected traditional figure, Chief M. K. O. Abiola, is seeking the presidency and the Agwu boys meet him at a campaign stop at their school. In the novel, as in reality, Abiola won the election but the results were annulled, and he spent the next several years in a military prison. The Agwu family follows politics more closely than the Uku family of Ile's novel, but political events unfold with a sense of fatal inevitability. Ordinary citizens carry on as best they can.

Whereas Ile's novel is told in simple and direct language, Obioma's narrative is rich in imagery and metaphor. Chapters open with arresting analogies: "Father was an eagle," "Ikenna was a python," "Mother was a falconer." Sometimes illuminating, sometimes only enigmatic, these images invite us to look beyond surface realities to deeper dimensions.

With their father away, the boys set out secretly to fish in a local river that is both heavily polluted and ritually off-limits. There they meet a madman named Abulu who embodies everything their family rejects: foul-mouthed, ill-behaved, smelling of "rotten food, and unhealed wounds and pus, and of bodily fluids and wastes." Abulu pronounces prophecies, which may be only the rantings of a disconnected mind or may be messages from a spiritual realm to which he is privy. And these prophecies include a dreadful prediction for the Agwu family.

Mr. Agwu—in the narrative he is always "Father"—returns home and learns of his sons' illicit expeditions. After administering a reprimand and a beating, Father counsels, "You could be a different kind of fisherman. Not the kind that fish at a

FROM NIGERIA TO AMERICA AND BACK

CHIGOZIE OBIOMA was born in 1986 in Akure, Nigeria. He was encouraged to write by his father, who as a child had worked in the home of the celebrated Nigerian poet Gabriel Okara. Obioma's first novel, *The Fishermen*, portrays a family in the midst of Nigerian politics, faith, mystery, and mythology. Obioma teaches writing at the University of Nebraska.

How did you decide to write *The Fishermen*?

I set off to write the novel after my dad mentioned a growing closeness between my two oldest brothers, who'd had a very serious rivalry growing up. I started to think about what it means to love your brother. What if my brothers' time of closeness had never come? That reflection brought me to the idea of a close-knit family whose closeness is destroyed.

I had been reading Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization*, and something he said stood out: "A great civilization cannot be destroyed from the outside; it has to come from within." What could destroy this family? I ultimately came upon prophecy as the most potent tool to disrupt the group's unity. The prophecy would be handed over by someone who remains benign, not knowing the extent to which he has damaged the people.

That prophecy comes from a character called Abulu, whom the boys call a "madman." What role do people like Abulu play in Nigerian life?

A lot of mentally challenged people like Abulu roamed the streets of Akure when I was growing up. But I never encountered any prophesying madmen. Abulu is in the novel because I needed a character who could test the unity of the family. I thought I would invest such power into a character like Abulu—someone without authority. He is not a pastor and not a psychic.

Yet Abulu has a political dimension. *The Fishermen* is about a disrupted civilization. One of the book's epigraphs, a poem by Mazisi Kunene, says, "The madman has entered our house with violence / Defiling our sacred grounds / Claiming the single truth of the universe." This is how Western colonialists came into West Africa. Their claims—that there was only one God, and that a woman could be queen—were extremely strange to the Africans at the time. The Africans laughed at them. But at the end of the day, the madman with his one God and his woman king destroyed the civilization.

Who are your greatest religious influences?

I don't have religious influences the way I have literary influences, like Vladimir Nabokov and Chinua Achebe. But I used to

filthy swamp like the Omi-Ala, but fishermen of the mind. Go-getters. Children who will dip their hands into rivers, seas, oceans of this life and will become successful: doctors, pilots, professors, lawyers."

Eventually the madman's prophecy is fulfilled in a maelstrom of fratricidal conflict. In the aftermath, two of the four brothers are dead. With the third brother, Benjamin plots revenge against the madman. When this brother flees and goes into hiding, Benjamin remains behind to face criminal charges.

By filling in events of the narrative through flashbacks to earlier times of childhood, Obioma constructs characters of depth and complexity. Their spiritual lives are as fragmented and disordered as their actions. They attend church with Mother while fearing the spirits of the river. Never becoming the "fishers of good dreams" their father envisioned, they discover that hope itself is like "a tadpole: the thing you caught and brought home with you in a can, but which, despite being kept in the right water, soon died."

The Fishermen has gained a remarkable list of awards—short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, winner of the NAACP Image Award, included in countless best-of-2015 lists. Inevitably, it has been compared to Chinua Achebe's classic novel, and several reviewers have asked whether it is today's *Things Fall Apart*. That book makes an unannounced appearance in Obioma's novel when Benjamin's brother recounts the story of "the strong man, Okonkwo, who was reduced to committing suicide by the wiles of the white man," from "a book whose title he could not recall." Achebe also appears obliquely in Ile's narrative when the Uku family watches "the mini-series *Things Fall Apart*" on the national television network.

If Obioma's book is to be compared with a work by Achebe, a better candidate would be the sequel, *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe's tale of a Nigerian who returns from abroad as a hero and reformer but is brought down by economic and spiritual forces he cannot fully understand or control. But there is no need to praise contemporary Nigerian fiction by setting it alongside the work of a half century ago. These works by Ile and Obioma join a crowded shelf of exceptionally engaging fiction by Nigerian writers, many of them effectively living and writing in two worlds at once. Both publishers are North American; Ile resides in Nigeria; Obioma studied creative writing in Michigan and now resides in Nebraska.

Through the gift of fiction, these Nigerian writers offer North American readers an opportunity to see their own culture in a clearer light. Neither of the novels is primarily a narrative of colonial or post-colonial struggle, yet both contribute to what Kenyan writer and theorist Ngugi wa Thiong'o has called "decolonizing the mind." Two boys of just nine years, Ajie and Benjamin, can be our guides. CC

read books by Watchman Nee. *The Spiritual Man* was one of my favorites. I read many books by A. W. Tozer, who is an American. Smith Wigglesworth and Perry Stone—these were popular authors among Nigerian Pentecostals. In Nigeria, we don't really care for fiction. We read mostly religious books—the Bible or the Qur'an—and motivational books.

Tell me about the relationship between religious and literary language in your work.

I grew up reading a lot of scripture, and there was a time in my life when I devoured Christian literature. My aesthetics have been shaped by this ancient way of telling stories. As critics have noted, *The Fishermen* is deeply biblical. The story of Cain and Abel with its rift between two brothers is an important part of the novel. There are other things lifted directly from the Bible, like when Ikenna says to his brothers, "Come with me. I will make you fishermen."

Nigeria is extremely religious. I grew up going to a church similar to the one in the book. It was an important part of our lives: the Sunday school, the music. The act of going to church itself is a ceremony in Africa. Sundays are a big deal. So a religious setting naturally seeps into the everyday lives of the boys in the novel. After the demise of two of the boys, it's the pastor who drives the van back and forth, and who visits the family. He is the one who pronounces the boys the "fishermen."

How would you compare and contrast Christianity in Nigeria and Christianity in the United States, now that you've lived here a while?

They are radically different. If you go to a church in Nigeria, you may not recognize the religion that is practiced there. A good example is the practice of revering pastors. In Nigeria they walk on a red carpet; their egos can be so inflated. In traditional West African religion, priests were revered. If they were coming to a town, they needed harbingers to warn women and children to stay indoors. That sense of power was imported into Christianity. When Nigerians hear that in Christian theology the pastor should be a servant, washing the church members' feet, they can't make sense of that.

Nigerians mix traditional ways of living with Western ideas and structures. In university admissions, for example, young people who are not qualified finish high school and their families make a phone call: somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody will get their name in. This is cronyism, and it's a major problem in Nigeria.

But it's rooted in cultural values. Prior to the coming of the British, there was no direct negotiation of any sort among the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria. It was considered disrespectful to go directly to the source. If you wanted to have a girlfriend, you couldn't go to the girl and say, "I love you." You had to know somebody who knew the parents and could arrange a conversation for you. Otherwise, the girl would be insulted. This process doesn't work well within a Western system, where it's considered corruption.

What do you see as your calling in Nigeria?

I am going on a massive, earth-scorching endeavor to teach Western ethics—at least to the children. I don't think it's advisable to dismantle everything and go back to the African way. A technologically driven, Western civilization is now the norm globally. Therefore, we need to understand and practice Western ethics to the letter. I want to set up an institute that will train children going to primary school. My idea—which is shared by those working with me—is to reorient the people.

—Amy Frykholm

Faith MATTERS

by Carol Zaleski

Identity as a calling

WHAT RELIGION do you identify as?" one of my students asked me the other day. To answer in the stated terms—"I identify as a Christian"—would be to wear my identity too lightly. To say "I am a Christian" has greater existential weight; but God help me if, having made such a profession, I cannot carry the weight.

"What are your preferred pronouns?" I heard one student ask another. I am a grammatical traditionalist, but I appreciate the idealism behind this question, the generous willingness to embrace whatever self-presentation another person might elect.

My students say such things out of sensitivity to others. In the instances I've observed, it's not a case of narcissistic identity politics gone mad, as some media pundits would have it. But the "identify as" wording does reflect a pervasive unease. We've lost our bearings on a fundamental question about human nature. We're told, on the one hand, that identity is a fact we are born with, written in our genes; on the other, that identity is endlessly open to revision, written on the water. These two notions are in conflict, and we're uncertain how to negotiate a truce between them. The virtue of notion one—identity conceived as fixed—is that it encourages loyalty to one's kind; its characteristic vice is exclusion. The virtue of notion two—identity conceived as fluid—is that it encourages self-awareness and capacity for change; its characteristic vice is anomie.

Ideally, we should be able to make a synthesis of these two conceptions, discriminating the virtues from the vices on each side. It should be possible to affirm the moral freedom and plasticity to remake oneself without denying what are the givens in one's nature, to affirm one's identity without closing ranks in polarized communities. But I doubt that this kind of balance and discernment can be attained without a deep anthropological foundation. The human sciences provide essential information about biology and behavior, but for deep anthropology the best place to look is the world's religions.

It is an impressive fact that all the great religions locate identity in relationship to a reality that transcends the self, a relationship that constitutes the self as both fixed (in its source and ground) and fluid (in its capacity for action and change). The sacred texts of classical Hinduism, for instance, are a chorus of affirmations that the true self—the *atman*—is eternal, unchanging, and intimately related to the divine; the problem is that we mistake the ego self—the *ahamkara* (literally, "I-maker")—for the sovereign *atman*. To correct this mistaken self-identification is to subdue the passions that poison our

social interactions. Classical Buddhism tells us that every time I say "this is me" or "this is mine" I imprison myself in an unreal mental construction, obscuring my awareness of and compassionate engagement with other sentient beings. The Confucian tradition tells us that identity is constituted by relationships that are fixed according to social norms, yet rendered fluid and gracious by acts of self-emptying mutual regard.

For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, identity is a gift and a calling. We are creatures before we are anything else, fragile and corruptible yet made for a reason, with a unique part to play in the working out of the divine plan. Vocation—such a beautiful word—runs deeper than the usual identity markers. Vocation is fixed from the moment of conception ("before I formed you in the womb, I knew you"), and it is here, if anywhere, that our personality find its stable center. Yet vocation is also fluid, telic, oriented toward change ("no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me").

Do I identify as a mother? No, I *am* a mother, and I believe this fact is my vocational identity, even though it might conceivably not have come to pass. Do I identify as Christian? I can only hope for the grace to say *I am* and at the end of days to be received as such. My preferred pronouns? I would rather dispense with the third person altogether than adopt *they* as a singular pronoun, or *ze* and *zir*, or the like. My preferred pronouns are "you and I" and "we and us." God's preferred pronoun? *Thou*.

It's no accident that when Augustine's *Confessions*, the first truly self-revealing autobiography, burst forth "like lightning from a clear sky" (as the saying goes), it took the form of a dialogue, I and Thou, rather than a third-person account. Years ago a friend of mine tried to make the *Confessions* more accessible to undergraduates by rendering second-person passages in third-person English; the experiment, he admitted, was a failure, for it diverted attention from the depths of Augustine's dialogue with God to the shallows of debate about gendered pronouns.

It's hard enough to be a human being. If the world's religions are right, self-realization is possible only in relationship to a reality beyond the self. Where personal existence is conceived as a transcendent calling, where relationship is genuine, where traditional language is honored and adapted rather than overwritten in haste, our most neuralgic identity worries lose their sting.

Carol Zaleski is professor of world religions at Smith College.

IN Review

Critics of a savage empire

by Edward J. Blum

Because of Hollywood, Rudyard Kipling is best remembered for his collection of short stories *The Jungle Book*. When we think of Kipling, if we consider him at all, we usually draw to mind cute or harrowing adventures of children and animals.

For Anglo-American history, however, Kipling is better recalled as the author of "The White Man's Burden," a poignant poem from the late 1890s. Addressed to white Americans at the birth of their overseas empire during the Spanish-American War of 1898, this poem offers perspective from British experiences. "Take up the White Man's burden," the poem begins, "Send forth the best ye breed— / Go, bind your sons to exile / To serve your captives' need." The poem then describes colonized peoples as "half devil and half child." For Americans like Theodore Roosevelt, the poem inspired imperialism, which it appeared to wrap in sacrificial effort.

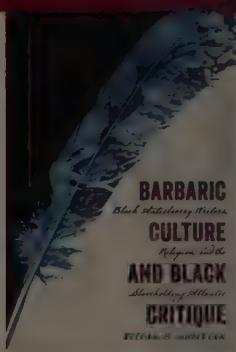
What Roosevelt and many others missed was Kipling's warning. Empire meant responsibility and work, but it also meant judgment. "By all ye will or whisper," Kipling counseled, "By all ye leave or do, / The silent sullen peoples / Shall weigh your God and you."

Kipling was right, in part. Those who have been exploited by Anglo-American empires throughout the centuries have weighed their gods and their people. They have judged white societies and their faiths by what they have done and what they have failed to do. For some, like Malcolm X, the actions of many white people proved not only their religious hypocrisy but also the falsity of their faith traditions. For others, white supremacy revealed a corrupted Christianity. Where Kipling was wrong, however, was in thinking the oppressed people were silent.

As literary historian Stefan M. Wheelock demonstrates, black writers from the late 18th and early 19th centuries judged modern Euro-American cultures. The perspectives of writers like Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, and Maria Stewart did more than shed light on the devastating experience of enslavement; their narratives and writings cut to the heart of modernity. Wheelock shows how these writers used innovative interpretations of biblical scriptures, ethical philosophies, and specific historical examples to interrogate British and American societies from the age of Revolution to the years just before the American Civil War.

Although slaves were often cast as "barbarians" or "heathens," writers like Cugoano, Equiano, Walker, and Stewart identified white societies as barbaric or in danger of barbarism. In creating slave regimes, defending them, benefiting from them, or simply accepting their existence, the Anglo-American world was regressing, not progressing. Anglo-American Christians were not true Christians, this logic ran, because they failed to practice what they preached.

In fact, they practiced the opposite. Rather than follow the gospel of love, they followed commercial lust. Anglo-American lovers of political independence were in fact hypocrites who thrived because of their creation of dependent communities. With each example, Wheelock shows how these writers called into question the claims of Anglo-American culture to represent freedom, democracy, and Christianity. In order to have any of these in reality, the authors suggested, white citizens of Britain and the United States would need to own the savagery and barbarity of the systems of enslavement and empire they created.



Barbaric Culture and Black Critique: Black Antislavery Writers, Religion, and the Slaveholding Atlantic

By Stefan M. Wheelock
University of Virginia Press, 232 pp.,
\$29.50 paperback

In terms of professional scholarship, Wheelock's work is a breath of fresh air because it refuses to abide by any racial color line. This is not a book of only black writers. It is one where the works of Cugoano, Equiano, Walker, and Stewart are set in dynamic tension and conversation with white writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Granville Sharp, Jonathan Edwards, and Thomas Jefferson. The world of print has never been as racially segregated as some scholars have presented it. W. E. B. Du Bois famously wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), "I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas." Robert Penn Warren is most famous for his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the King's Men* (1946), but in the 1960s he made it a point to listen to and record the opinions of African Americans during the civil rights era.

The most vital element of Wheelock's book is what his authors and his interpretation have to say to our current moment. The graphic footage of beaten and murdered African Americans, the violent clashes with police officers, and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement have generated intense debate. Donald

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Trump and Rudy Giuliani blame the activists for the bloodshed. Liberal scholars cite the problems of mass incarceration and police behavior. In all of the sound and fury, what may be lost are the broader currents of African-American critique of contemporary America.

Cornel West, for example, has voiced great displeasure with Barack Obama for failing to see economics, education, employment, and international wars in terms of race. For West, tackling these broader issues without attention to white supremacy is myopic and dangerous. To read West's perspective as if it only spoke to African Americans would be to limit it significantly. His critical reach could lead to profound questions about where one purchases a home, where one sends children to school, or how one invests in companies or votes at election time.

Black insights from the past and the present offer much more than reflections on the state of being black at any given time. Women and men of color throughout Anglo-American history have provided analysis and critique that speaks to the core of social experiences. Frederick Douglass's narratives were about far more than his bondage and his freedom. They were about the bondages of slaveholders, the freedoms of faith, the terror for all of a society based upon slavery. Du Bois did not simply want freedom for African Americans; he wanted equality for all within the United States and the world.

Recently, Alveda King, a niece of Martin Luther King Jr. who is a Republican and a priest, has powerfully linked her own lived experiences and interactions with medical professionals, her two abortions, her Christian faith, and racism in powerful ways. "Racism and abortion are twins," she argues. "Racism oppresses its victims, but also binds the oppressors, who sear their consciences with more and more lies until they become prisoners of those lies." Whether one likes or dislikes King's politics, it is clear that there is much more in her work than a simple denigration of racism or exploitation of African Americans.

After reading Wheelock's book, I am reminded once again that while Kipling warned white people to pay attention to what oppressed people whisper or say, Jesus' instructions were even more blunt: all who have ears to hear, let them hear.

The Beatitudes

By George Hunsinger

Paulist Press, 168 pp., \$19.95

Jesus and the Prodigal Son: The God of Radical Mercy

By Brian J. Pierce

Orbis, 240 pp., \$25.00 paperback

Christians read and hear the Gospels expecting to encounter the voice of Jesus. Biblical scholars make a living by complicating that relationship. In accounting for processes of historical traditioning and pious elaboration, scholars distance the historical Jesus who walked upon calloused feet from the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And by insisting that a massive historical and cultural gap separates the Gospels from believers, scholars demand that Christians pause a minute before discerning what Jesus is saying to "us."

How refreshing, then, that two new books, neither of them written by a professional biblical scholar, introduce readers directly to Jesus through his own teaching. George Hunsinger, a theologian, finds in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:2-12) a Jesus who not only pronounces blessing upon others but also embodies the very blessings he announces. Brian J. Pierce, a Dominican friar, identifies Jesus with the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Like the Prodigal, Jesus abandons a heavenly home, endures great hardship, and returns in glory. Both Hunsinger and Pierce draw upon biblical scholarship only selectively as they offer compelling and distinctive interpretations.

Hunsinger divides the Beatitudes into two groups: four that speak to the needy and four that call the faithful to embody certain virtues. The final Beatitude, which involves persecution, comes in two steps: persecution for pursuing righteousness and persecution directed specifically at Jesus' followers. Each of the book's corresponding nine chapters begins with a

Reviewed by Greg Carey, who is professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and resident scholar for Lancaster's Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity.

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reflection on Jesus, who himself embodies and defines the blessing under consideration. Hunsinger proceeds to explore each Beatitude's implications, first for believers and then for those beyond the circle of discipleship.

Beyond this common framework, each chapter has its own distinct structure. Readers encounter meditations upon exemplary Christians, the recognition that creation itself hungers and thirsts for justice, and a deep reflection on the power of the sacraments to purify us. Hunsinger offers an impressive stream of surprising and edifying thoughts, all grounded in his focused approach to Jesus and the Beatitudes.

Other interpreters have also divided the Beatitudes into sets of four identities and four vocations, and it may be the case that Hunsinger's choice has more potential than he realizes. One critical question about this passage involves its audience: only Jesus' disciples follow him up the mountain (5:1), yet somehow the crowd overhears his teaching (7:28–29). So it's not clear whether Jesus' teaching applies only to disciples or to all people. This factor comports remarkably well with Hunsinger's decision to open each Beatitude both to Jesus' disciples and to an outer circle. Moreover, the Beatitudes introduce the entire Sermon on the Mount. Might not those first four blessings function as an invitation for hearers to identify with Jesus and his way, and the last four as the epitome of what it means to follow this path?

Pierce's book is a bit more meditative, a little less structured, and somewhat more of an interpretive reach than Hunsinger's. It's also a lot more personal. Pierce shares an encounter long ago with a biblical scholar who dismissed his reading of the Prodigal: "Impossible! The prodigal son in the parable is a sinner and Jesus was without sin." Over time and through his encounters with various people, Pierce came to own his own insights. It's not that Jesus himself sins—he does in fact identify with sinners—but rather that God made Jesus to be sin for our sake. He dies a sinner in the eyes of the world, but in the resurrection he "is finally revealed to us as the Savior of the world."

Parables, Pierce argues, are meant more to provoke than to be solved, and this particular parable "is broad enough" to host multiple interpretations. His reading of the parable extends beyond the terms of its one little story to embrace the entire narrative of God's love for humanity, especially in the incarnation. The younger brother who departs from his comfortable home evokes Jesus' condescension from his heavenly home to dwell with mortals. But it also evokes the wanderings of Israel, of the church, and, well, of everyone. Jesus leaves home not to break relationship with his Father but to share his inheritance with all of us.

Like Hunsinger, Pierce offers many fresh insights and pressing questions. Jesus' table fellowship stretches into the radical hospitality of the Eucharist. The Prodigal's period of alienation functions as a lesson on Jesus' descent into hell "to search for lost sheep." Jesus the returning/risen Prodigal becomes a wounded healer who brings reconciliation and wholeness to all people.

A biblical scholar might object that Pierce and Hunsinger impose upon these passages considerations that are alien to the text. One might especially complain that on occasion Pierce veers frighteningly close to familiar anti-Jewish stereotypes of Jesus' run-ins with his opponents. I would argue that both books raise critical questions about what constitutes faithful interpretation. Both authors begin with very high Christologies that emphasize Jesus as the center of Christian revelation and persist in a full-throated affirmation of the incarnation. Ultimately, the aim of interpretation for both Pierce and Hunsinger is not to distill a lesson or two from the text but rather to open space for an intimate encounter with Jesus.

Critical biblical scholarship might function as a helpful consultant to Hunsinger and Pierce. More could be said about each of these classic biblical stories; occasionally one might wish for less. On balance, however, biblical specialists have more to learn from these two synthetic, theologically attuned readings than to add to them. I look forward to recommending both books for use in church and among friends.

Varieties of Gifts: Multiplicity and the Well-Lived Pastoral Life

By Cynthia G. Lindner
Rowman & Littlefield, 176 pp.,
\$22.00 paperback

Horse doctors and weather prophets were among the many roles assumed by black preachers after the Civil War, writes W. E. B. Du Bois. In those days, congregations were community centers, and the multiple leadership roles of clergy were obvious. Multiplicity was taken for granted. Not so today.

This is why we need Cynthia Lindner's study of 21st-century pastors, which demonstrates the value of pastors drawing from multiple internal energy sources in order to exercise their gifts in multiple forms. Lindner, who has experience in parish ministry, hospice work, and psychotherapy and directs the ministry program at the University of Chicago Divinity School, examines the stories of pastors serving mainline congregations, many of which are now small but not long ago were bursting at the seams.

Lindner draws on the tradition of autobiography as theological narrative from Augustine to Dorothy Day, the psychological category of multiplicity with roots in Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories*, and the work of several other contemporary psychologists. But she doesn't dwell on theory and moves quickly to the best part of the book, the stories themselves. Her storytellers—female and male, gay and straight, old and young, African American and Caucasian—talk straightforwardly about the challenges of contemporary ministry and the need for multiple strategies.

Brief memorable exchanges reveal the heart of ministry while opening up the life of faith. Lindner is frank and so are the pastors she interviews. When a church member says, "You know, I don't think that I believe in God," the pastor replies, "Well, I'm with you. Sometimes I don't either." Later in the book, Lindner recounts the words of a pastor named Art: "I care about you and I can hear you. Maybe it doesn't have to be more complicated than that. Maybe we don't need more books about leadership theory or

‘ten easy steps to church growth.’ Maybe we just need to care about who we have.”

Another story, echoing the film *The Lady in the Van*, recounts Caren’s dream of walking in “womb-like labyrinths” when God appears as a bag lady living in the basement of her house. “One day there’s a knock at the door and there’s an earth-mother-y type woman standing there. Long hair, baggy clothes, bags, loaves of bread and fruit.” Later the bag lady appears in an evening gown and hands out chocolate truffles at Caren’s party. Her guests exclaim, “Oh, what a lovely woman lives in your basement!” This dream prompted Caren to figure out how “to integrate the goddess that lives in the basement.”

Some counterintuitive wisdom about renewal emerges in the story of an introverted pastor who was burning out doing administrative work. He discovered that he had to “re-create in his inferior,” that is, find renewal by doing something uncharacteristic, something extroverted. He reports, “I didn’t need ‘away time.’ I didn’t need ‘alone time.’ I went into my inferior—for me, that meant just being with people.” He found renewal by doing the very thing that burns out other pastors: increasing his visitation schedule.

Pastors, like all people, have multiple voices echoing in their heads. Some of the most refreshing voices, which may have been latent in the collective consciousness for generations, are now ascending. One such voice claims: “Running the church is not the role of the pastor—other people in the church should be doing that.” This same pastor continues on the topic of control-oriented pastors (of whom, let’s face it, there have been many). They are “getting in God’s way. It’s a form of idolatry, really.” Another pastor talks about sharing power, first asking, “Why can’t the two of us be in charge?” and then, “Why can’t the whole community be in charge?”

Other stories recount the difficulty of coming to grips with the social demands of ministry. An African-American pastor remembers listening to Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Stokely Car-

michael and grappling with conflicting demands of the “‘civilized church’ on the one hand and black activism on the other.” King’s assassination became “the crucible in which my sense of call to ministry eventually emerged.” This pastor had to learn inwardly and for himself the nature of faith in his historical context, so it was with “deep unanswered questions” that he affirmed the simple human truth: “I had to trust.”

This is the equivalent of what I learned in a seminary class on Luther’s theology in which the professor was fond of saying, “You can’t get away from the faith situation.” Lindner quotes Chrysostom on the complications of the inner life: “The shepherd needs great wisdom and a thousand eyes to examine the soul’s condition from every angle.” These thousand eyes represent the multiplicity that is necessary to the pastoral life.

They also remind us that in ministry we are never alone. When asked to tell a story that best represents himself as minister, Rob recalls counseling a woman whose husband had died suddenly. A new pastor at the time, Rob

was scared to death. “What do I do? What do I say?” So you just go and be there . . . I think it’s not you, so much as what you represent. And at the same time, it is also who you are—you bring all that too. Still, years later you say to yourself: “I can’t believe I could do such a thing. That must have been somebody else!”

Where is the self in this picture? It’s both fully present and yet mysteriously absent. Somebody else comes to help. *Varieties of Gifts* testifies that God is not done with the church.

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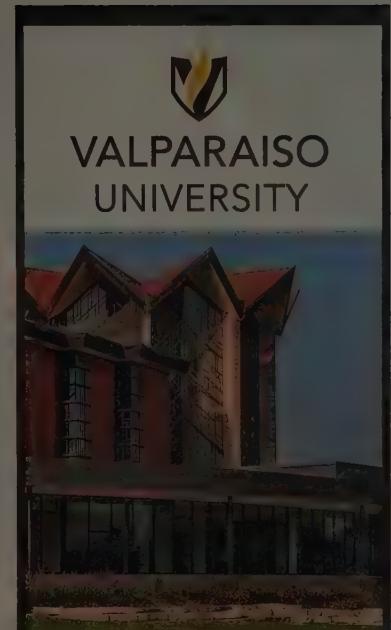
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Reviewed by John McEntyre, retired Presbyterian minister, practicing artist (mcentyreart.com), and former professor at St. Mary’s College.



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**Selected Poems of
Edna St. Vincent Millay:
An Annotated Edition**
Edited by Timothy F. Jackson
Yale University Press. 344 pp., \$35.00

For much of her adult life, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) lived with her husband on a small farm in upstate New York. Steepletop, near Albany, provided Millay with space to write away from the noise that followed the publication of her earliest books to popular acclaim and her reception of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1923. Millay's assertive feminist voice challenged social conventions in poems suffused with images from nature.

Timothy Jackson, who received his Ph.D. from the Editorial Institute at Boston University, drew on first editions of Millay's works between 1917 and 1954 for this scholarly collection. He strives to counter the traditional preference for Millay's early writings—she tarnished her own reputation with universally panned propaganda poems during WWII—by providing a more balanced selection spanning her professional life. He also includes Millay's wonderful self-portrait, "E. St. V. M.," previously unpublished in any anthology of her collected poetry.

Millay's poem "Renascence" first drew her talents to national attention. The narrator of the poem encounters the immense suffering of humanity and individual finitude in a state of life-in-death. Love, however, brings release from the suffocating weight of the grave, a transformation of vision, and new birth through a Pauline conversion of heart in which "night / Fell from my eyes and I could see." "Renascence" launched Millay's career, but some critics wondered how a "sweet young thing of twenty" could write with such potency: "it takes a brawny male of forty-five to do that." Millay responded to the faultfinder with a nymphish photo and characteristic verve: "The brawny male sends his picture. I have to laugh."

Millay's poetry represents a unique American iteration of 20th-century mod-

ernism. In "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" (1923), for example, Millay explores the perspective of a woman newly widowed after living imprisoned in an unhappy marriage. The poem opens with the woman entering into "his house" but "Loving him not at all." The man dies, and the woman sets about her daily tasks with chin set forward. The scene advances with evocative descriptions of "locusts rising raspingly," "green logs with a wet gray rind," and "sleeping ashes." Millay's haunting images advance the narrative and reveal a somber portrait of an individual worn by obligation:

She gave her husband of her body's
strength,
Thinking of men, what helpless things
they were.

Married to a foreigner, she sees the man
lying "severe and dead" before her.

Millay, who had an open marriage, engaged in numerous affairs with men and women. Thinly veiled allusions to

Millay's fleeting romantic desires abound in insinuations of imprudent love, alterable moods, and brittle oaths. "Faithless am I save to love's self alone," she wrote in *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920–22).

But readers won't easily trace Millay's personal life in this collection. Holly Peppe, Millay's literary executor, writes in the introduction that her mission is to dissociate Millay's biography from her poetry. "I had not been attentive enough to the shifts between poet and persona," Peppe claims, and "I abandoned the notion that her poems were like pages torn from her diary." Jackson follows Peppe's lead throughout the text, providing only occasional biographical context and virtually no theoretical assistance for newcomers.

Millay's previously unpublished prose manuscript, "Essay on Faith" (1911), written when she was not yet 20, is one of the gems of this volume. The essay divulges Millay's independent spirit and critical mind. "If you cannot worship God whom you have not seen," Millay

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Reviewed by Jeffrey W. Barbeau, who teaches theology at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

writes, "worship the sun." The essay indicates that Millay's concern for being and finitude in "Renascence" was no mere commercial ploy. The essay asserts the freedom of the self against responsibility for the other: "The universe is made up of a million universes, each one as big as itself, for all infinities are equal."

Jackson fails, however, to include poems prominently exhibiting spiritual themes among selections from Millay's later works, giving the impression that she simply moved on from such youthful musings. Millay's *The Buck in the Snow and Other Poems* (1928), for example, contains a scathing treatment of religion

but is left out of this volume. In "To Jesus on His Birthday," she portrays a silver-tongued preacher who drones on before an audience concerned only with material possessions, while the rolled stone of the resurrection suffocates the mouth of God: "How mute you lie within your vaulted grave."

Dismissing such potent works (the politically charged "Hangman's Oak" also comes to mind) magnifies the impact of presenting Millay's poetry largely dissociated from her personal life—the woman whose affairs, addictions, and political views made her such a fascinating and complicated artist. Her poetry attends to themes that touch every generation—death, faith, love, grief. But if there is to be a revival of Millay's reputation in our own day, and I hope there is, the full complexity of her poetry and persona will need to be underscored by more substantial critical analysis than is found in this otherwise delightful volume.

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By Gayle Boss; illustrated by David G. Klein
Paraclete Press, 112 pp., \$18.99 paperback

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ON Media

The visions of Nat Turner

Nate Parker's film *The Birth of a Nation* draws its name from D. W. Griffith's aesthetically acclaimed but racist 1915 film. Parker counters Griffith's racist mythology with a story that puts the history and agency of African Americans at the center.

The movie is about Nat Turner (played by Parker), leader of the bloodiest slave rebellion in U.S. history. In 1831 Turner and fellow rebels killed 60 members of slaveholding families, including infants and children. They did it under the banner of divine mandate—Turner was a Christian preacher and claimed that the Holy Spirit orchestrated the rebellion.

The film won major prizes at the Sundance Film Festival and was sold to Fox Searchlight Pictures for a record \$17.5 million. Controversy arose when reports circulated that Parker and one of the film's cocreators, Jean Celestin, were tried on rape charges in the late 1990s. Parker was acquitted. Celestin was sentenced to serve two to four years in prison, though the verdict was later vacated. In 2012, the victim in the case committed suicide. When the story of the trial and suicide resurfaced, some protested the film and called for a boycott.

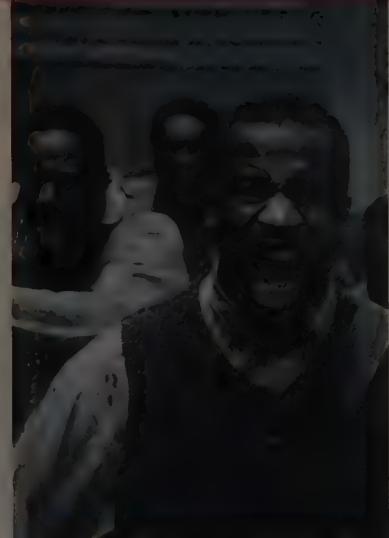
Rape and accusations of rape are at the center of both Griffith's and Parker's films. In Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the "true America" is born through the heroic actions of the Ku Klux Klan. When a white woman jumps to her death to avoid being raped by a black man, white southerners form the Klan to avenge her death

and later bring white northerners into their fold to purify the nation from "African pollution."

Parker rewrites this white supremacist fiction with a story in which Turner and his fellow male slaves plan the rebellion after two enslaved women are brutally raped by white men. Although the rebellion fails (the participants plus hundreds of other enslaved and free blacks were killed in retaliation), Turner's actions pave the way for future insurrections and for African-American participation in the Civil War. Turner's rebellion, in Parker's story, is at least partially responsible for birthing a nation that includes the full participation of black men.

The greatest weakness of Parker's film is that it continues the idea (central in Griffith's film) that heroes are men who act to protect or defend women. It may be asking too much for a first-time director on a limited budget to overturn this Hollywood convention, especially with Parker echoing a film that is often cited as the first to use this narrative device. And there is something thrilling in seeing black male heroes exercising their agency *Braveheart*-style.

But Parker might have complicated this convention by paying more attention to Turner's religious motivations. He does not ignore Turner's religiosity, which would be nearly impossible since it's central to the historical figure, but he does domesticate it. For Parker, Turner is more of a biblical interpreter than a fiery visionary. He explains to his fellow male slaves that the Bible contains at least as



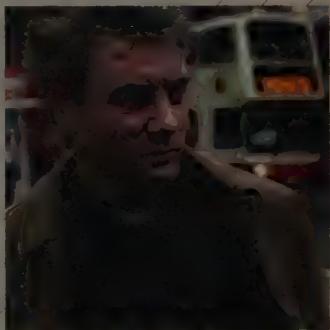
SLAVE REBEL: Nate Parker plays Nat Turner in a film countering the racism of the first Birth of a Nation.

many teachings that would condemn slavery as would condone it, and he thinks of the white man's use of the Bible as a weapon of oppression. For Turner, the Bible's power depends on his ability to use it to indict slave masters.

But the historical Turner's faith was fueled by his visionary episodes at least as much as by his study of the Bible. The Spirit spoke to him and gave him fantastical and violent visions. He became convinced not just of his own heroic exceptionalism but that all enslaved people would become one body capable of rising up against injustice. For Turner it was not a new nation that was being born, but a new church, which heralded the coming of the kingdom of God.

We may recoil from Turner's strident language or from the violence that Turner believed was a necessary part of his rebellion. But if we listen to the voices of the oppressed, we may be able to hear God's voice in Turner's prophecies. The story should unsettle us and press us to ask harder questions about where and how we hear the prompting of the Spirit. A film that pursued that topic would have been better and even more controversial.

The author is Kathryn Reklis, who teaches theology at Fordham University.



Faith Matters

Sam Wells

"I'm trying to do something beautiful: to run a church. Every day we're seeking to model the way Christ makes us God's companions through fun, fellowship, sacrifice, service, prayer, and play, and to draw Christian and non-Christian, slave and free, prosperous and desperate, agile and disabled, privileged and excluded into the company of grace and glory for which the simple word is communion.

That's what gets me out of bed in the morning: a stranger might wander in to a church café, concert, homeless drop-in, or committee meeting and say, 'This kingdom you speak of—this turning of society into community, this freedom and flourishing beyond market and state, this company of grace—what does it look like?' And we can sweep our hand over every aspect of our life together and say, gently but truly: 'It looks like this.'"

Read Sam's essays in **THE
Christian
CENTURY**

by Philip Jenkins

God among the gangs

In many countries around the world, religion is often indicted as the primary force driving hatred and violence. In at least one region, though, Christian churches not only work heroically to bring peace and reconciliation, but are literally the only signs of hope. And this powerful story has been unfolding on Americans' own doorstep.

Central America includes some of the world's most violent societies. Among the most troubled are the nations of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, which together comprise the Northern Triangle. All these countries were shaped by the savage civil wars that swept the region in the 1980s, killing hundreds of thousands. Many residents fled to Mexico or the United States, and when they or their children returned, some at least brought with them the gang cultures they had witnessed in Southern California and elsewhere.

Central American gangs became very large and intimidating organizations, with complex rituals and bloodthirsty initiations. The most notorious network, the heavily Salvadoran MS-13, claims 70,000 members and operates in multiple countries. Because of the arsenals left behind at the end of the civil wars, the gangs are extremely well armed, and they freely use paramilitary force to advance their interests and slaughter rivals. These groups flourish in areas that offer very few legal opportunities to gain a livelihood.

Another side effect of the

wars was to drive rapid and unplanned urbanization, as peasants fled a countryside that had become a free-fire zone. Since 1970, the combined population of the three countries has risen from 12 million to 30 million.

Taken together, the consequences would have been instantly recognizable to Thomas Hobbes. Lacking an effective or honest government, cities are divided on near-tribal lines. Tattooed warriors engage in acts of murder and torture. The region has the highest homicide rates for any part of the world not actually involved in war. In 2015, El Salvador's murder rate reached 90 per 100,000, compared to 4.5 for the United States. Cities like San Salvador and Tegucigalpa are among the most dangerous places on the planet. Prisons are effectively run by the gangs, and citizens regularly respond to street crimes by lynching offenders.

In such a situation, churches find themselves on the front lines. The chaos of the past few decades stirred a powerful religious revival, in part as a rejection of the worldly ideologies that had wrought such havoc. The most obvious manifestation is an upsurge of zealous Protestant and Pentecostal churches. Guatemala has become a symbol of Protestant growth in Latin America: 40 percent of Guatemalans are Protes-

tant, giving them near parity with Catholics.

Evangélico churches abound in the poor urban areas that also form the battlegrounds for the gangs, and here those churches are often the only functioning institutions representing the legitimate world. Day by day, pastors and the faithful witness violent battles, which they interpret as episodes of spiritual warfare.

Extensive religious interventions against violence have been discussed by several fine scholars, including Robert Brenneman, Kevin L. O'Neill, and Jon Wolseth. Together, their books show the many ways in which Christians seek to combat gangs, including seeking to prevent young people from being recruited and channeling them into paying work. Governments and international organizations fully support these faith-based enterprises, given the lack of any trustworthy alternatives.

Many church efforts involve helping people out of gang life and reintegrating them into the mainstream world. Churches play a key role here because the gangs retain some notional respect for the realm of faith. Normally there is no exit for a gang member short of death, and the only grudging exception to this "morgue rule" is when an individual claims a

religious conversion that forbids him to participate in his old activities. A sizable number of former gangsters have taken this route out of *la vida loca*, and some become pastors in their own right. Sincere conversion is literally a matter of life and death—the new Christian believer had better let nothing suggest that he is feigning his new faith.

Extricating gang members is only part of the story. If churches hope to retain the loyalty of those former gang soldiers, they must offer them a set of unconditional loyalties and beliefs comparable to what they had known before, a new world of unquestioning brotherhood. Ritualistic gang behaviors must be supplanted by new Christian customs and folkways, with baptism replacing the old initiation rites. Even when detached from the gangs, however, defectors find it very difficult to find jobs when their bodies are so indelibly marked with the gang tattoos with which they had once vaunted their willingness to kill.

The path out of violence involves many practical problems, but these are secondary to complex psychological struggles of identity and conversion. To adapt a much overused phrase: the battle is above all a battle for hearts, minds, and souls.

Philip Jenkins's Notes from the Global Church appears in every other issue.

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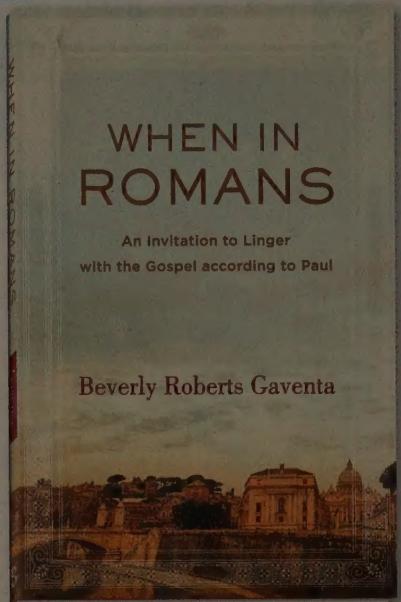
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***Fore Shadowing*, by Kaori Homma**

Kaori Homma calls her fire etchings (*Aburidashi*) "a silent lament . . . like the cicada's cry which has now stopped in Tokyo." She hopes to evoke the emotional devastation of nuclear disasters like the one that occurred at Fukushima in 2011 by using a technique once used to write secret messages. After rendering the images on paper with a concoction of lemon juice and vinegar, Homma holds the paper over the fire to bring out the images, then washes the paper. The resultant image is burned into the paper.

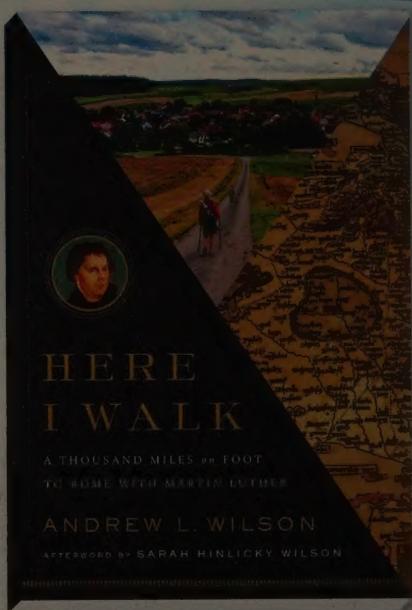
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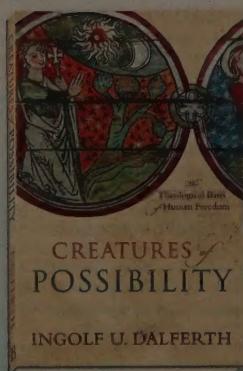
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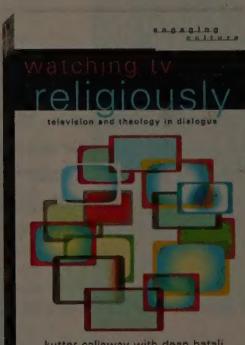
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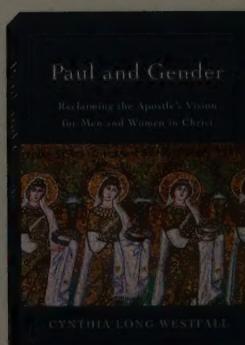
—John Wilson, editor, *Books & Culture*



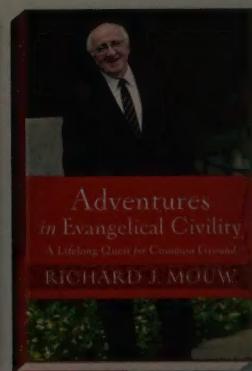
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